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SOMALI ELL STUDENTS' COMPOSITIONS: EXPLORATIONS INTO DEVELOPMENTAL SYNTAX

MEGAN C. DELL' ACQUA

ABSTRACT

Regardless of whether a student is a native English speaker or an English Language Learner (ELL), high school graduates are expected to be able to write in a clear, proficient manner. However, the productive skill of writing can be particularly challenging for second language (L2) learners. The purpose of this paper is to examine issues relevant to L2 writing as diagnosed from the sample text, "Essay #9: Unreported world – Somalia," which was written by a college-bound Somali student. Aspects of the paper focus on orthographic errors, syntactic issues, and pedagogical implications. The analysis reveals that both insufficient L2 grammatical knowledge and transfer of grammatical patterns from the learner's first language (L1) contribute to errors when writing in English. The analyses provided here are intended to inform pedagogical practices for teaching writing skills to ELLs. The patterns of errors encountered in this composition raise important issues in developmental syntax.

Keywords: Developmental Syntax, ELL Composition, Spelling Errors, Tense Switching, Tense Errors, L1 Morphology Transfer

1.0 Introduction

This paper was written as the final project for the Pedagogical Grammar for ESL Teachers course.¹ The essay entitled, "Essay #9: Unreported world – Somalia," was written by a high school graduate whose native language is Somali. The essay was submitted as part of a written placement exam which is given to international students upon acceptance to SCSU (Korver 2013). The first section of the paper will briefly address orthographic errors in the text. Next, the paper will look at two syntactic issues. The first deals with a morphosyntactic issue, namely the omission of the plural suffix <-s>. The second focuses on incorrect verb tense usage, more specifically on unnecessary tense switching. The paper concludes with pedagogical implications and applications for helping students avoid these types of errors. For ease of reference, Essay #9 is displayed below:

Essay #9: Unreported World – Somalia

In 1990 that was the time Somalia civil-war broke out and also it was my childhood, in fact, I was recording every single thing I see on my eye, there were a lot and a lot although some of them was unexpected in human nature. As people of Mogdisho remember everything went wrong direction. Looking the private and public properties and killing of disregardless of age and position, everybody headed on his/her face. Indeed, thing was unmentionable. Familes got lost each other when mother went side and father other side and child went opposition directions. In addition to that no body knows where he/she was going and what they can do. Although I was very young and I don't know what is going on but I can fee little. Mogdish the capital city of Somalia where my parent told me, was most

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Ettien Koffi for his encouragement and guidance in turning my final course project into a publishable paper. He made numerous comments and suggestions, most of which are included in this version of the paper.

beautiful and best city in East Africa at that time having all human service electricity, water system and high education immediately changes as bomb market where government and rebels killing anybody they see. There was a wisdom says “when two pools fight the crazy will sever” so that children and women was once who were severing most. Beside that there was no international agencies assistance the people at that time because of UN agencies pull out when the fighting started so women and children died starvation, as some international channels reported “some people die with out shelter while others eta wild animal like lion, because they don’t have ability that they can protect them selves. All in all war-lord and other primitive action some of Somalia citizen doing and without central government lead this starvations, 20 year without government is kind of disaster they feel, although they have two river “Jubba and Shell” but nobody take that adventure because the endless war going on every day and then. The things going to worst while some Jihadth refused international relief agencie to assist the needed once. And those are women and children. At end the people of Somalia they still have hope that things will become normal and get central government back.

2.0 Spelling Errors

Spelling and punctuation are very important components of writing. Most people are quick to judge a document that contains surface spelling and punctuation errors. Such a document can make the writer appear not credible. Essay #9 has many run-on sentences, misplaced commas, and incorrect uses of hyphen (e.g., <civil-war>, <war-lord>). There are also many spelling errors such as: <Mogdisho>, <Familes>, <Mogdish>, <with out>, <them selves>, etc. Poor spelling can create confusion and make comprehension difficult. As Altamimi and Ab Rashid (2019:318) point out, “The potential mistakes in written spellings may change the meaning and understanding of written material and would make it unclear.” I will not comment on all the spelling issues. Instead, I will focus mostly on those that can cause the sentence not to be understood. One such sentence is 1a:

1a. **Looking the private and public properties and killing of [...]*²

The incorrect spelling of <looting> above makes the sentence incomprehensible because the intended meaning is irretrievable. Since /t/ and /k/ are different phonemes in English, not using the correct segment causes a loss of meaning.

3.0 Errors Caused by Morphophonology

There are also errors such as the one below that are caused by a lack of mastery of morphophonology:

2a. **[...] refused international relief agencie to assist the needed once.*

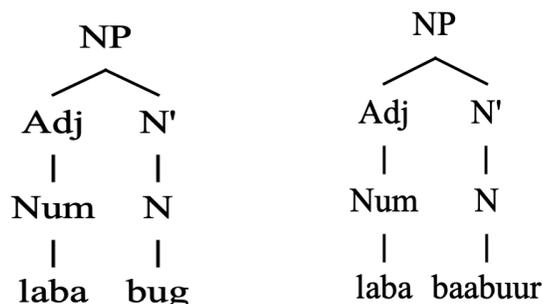
Even though <agency> is misspelled, the intended meaning of the word is still clear. The larger issue comes at the end of the sentence with <needed once>. We can make an educated guess that the author meant <needy ones>, but due to the misspelling, the sentence is not easily understood.

² Unless otherwise noted, misspelling and other grammatical errors are italicized.

A common contributing factor to errors in L2 writing is the transfer of grammatical patterns from a student's L1. ELL writers may resort to their L1 to compensate for deficiencies in their L2 knowledge. However, this can lead to errors if the student directly transfers a linguistic form from one language to the other (Karim and Nassaji 2012: 121). The author of Essay #9 made numerous inflectional morphology errors in the use of the plural suffix <-s>. In Somali, nouns are not inflected for plural when they come after numbers larger than one. Instead, there is a special counting form whereby the numeral and the noun, which remains in its singular form, constitute a noun phrase (Nilsson 2020: 39). Here are some examples:

- 2b. <hál bug> *one book*
 2c. <labá bug> *two books*
 2d. <hál baabuur> *one car*
 2e. <labá baabuur> *two cars*

Sentences 2C and 2e can be diagrammed as follows:



Figures 1a and 1b

We see here that the words <bug> (book) and <baabuur> (car) do not take any plural suffix. Instead, the numerals <hál> and <labá> appear before the nouns. In other words, when numerals denoting plurality precede a noun in Somali, there is no inflectional suffix on the noun. It is understood as being in the plural without any overt suffix being added to the noun. If Somali ELL students transfer this pattern into English, we will see plural nouns without the inflectional suffix <-s>. Here are two more examples of this possible transfer:

- 3a. [...], *20 *year* without government is kind of disaster they feel, [...]
 3b. [...], *although they have two *river* “Jubba and Shell” but nobody take that adventure

In these sentences, the author should have added the plurals suffix <-s> to <years> and <rivers>, respectively. Koffi (2015) notes that, “Because subject-verb agreement is very important for the grammaticality of English sentences, number information, whether singular or plural, is often provided for every noun in the deep structure” (p. 82). The deep structure forms of the nouns in these sentences would look like:

- 3c. Deep Structure: Twenty year Pl.
 3d. Deep Structure: two river Pl.

The plurality of the nouns is marked in the deep structure, however, the inflectional morphology rule of adding the suffix <-s> will not apply until later, after the transformational rules for the rest of the sentence have been applied (Koffi 2015:132). In the derivation, Spell-Out Rules are responsible for adding the plural suffix to nouns. For the author of Essay # 9, the inflectional morphology rule was never applied to the nouns, perhaps due to a combination of lack of English grammatical knowledge and the fact that the deep structures of these noun phrases look exactly as they would in Somali. Omission of the plural suffix <-s> is also seen in the following sentences:

- 4a. *Mogdish the capital city of Somalia where my *parent* told me,
 4b. ... *having all human service electricity, water *system*, high education ...
 4c. ... *while others eta wild *animal* like *lion* because they don't have ability ...
 4d. *All in all war-lord and other primitive *action* some of Somalia *citizen* ...

In Somali, a word cannot end in two consonants. When there is a word with a stem that ends in two consonants, the plural suffix that is added is the vowel <-ó> (Nilsson 2020:29). In English, when the plural suffix <-s> is added to the nouns above, it does create a two-consonant ending. However, we cannot say for sure if this is the reason why the author did not add <-s> to the words in the previous example. In fact, the author did spell other plural nouns accurately. The plural suffix <-s> was added to words that created consonant clusters in the coda. The words <directions>, <rebels>, <others>, <channels>, and <things> were spelled correctly. Perhaps the reason for the inconsistency here is that the writer's knowledge of nominal plural morphology is less assured. This led him/her to vacillate between the correct and incorrect forms for no apparent reasons. We see the same inconsistency with words that end in the vowel <e>:

- 5a. *I was recording every single thing I see on my *eye*,
 5b. *best city in East Africa at that time having all human *service*
 5c. *they have two river "Jubba and Shell" but nobody take that *adventure*

There are some irregular plural nouns in English that end in <-e> (e.g., <goose>, <mouse>, <wife>) but the nouns above are all regular. Therefore, they require the plural suffix <-s>. Again, it is tempting to attribute the errors in examples 5a through 5c to transfer, but we must acknowledge that this is not always the case. In fact, Nilsson (2020:23, 28) explains that in Somali, singular nouns ending in <-e> are masculine. They are pluralized by dropping the <-e> and adding the suffix <-ayaál> to them. We see this in the example below:

- 5d. aábe (father)
 5e. aabbayaál (fathers)

So, the case for a negative transfer is weak because the author does not delete the final <e> in the English words. The lack of a final <-s> when an English word ends in <e> is likely due to the fact that the writer has not mastered very well the English rule of plural formation. Sometimes the writer remembers the rule, sometimes he/she forgets them. The inconsistency in rule application

is the biggest challenge for this ELL writer. It must be made clear that the plural formation rule in English is not optional but obligatory.

4.0 Tense Agreement Issues

Tense agreement is when the verbs in a sentence agree in tense. If the tense of one verb is in the present, the tense of all the other verbs in the sentence must agree. Yet, a common pattern of tense disagreement, also known as an unnecessary switching between verb tenses, has been noted in the writing of ELLs. When this happens, it is difficult for readers to follow along with the writing (Beckham, n.d.). Essay #9 is a piece set in the 1990s, during the author's childhood, at the start of the civil war in Somalia. While the writer tries to keep the overall tone of the piece in the past, there are many sentences that have a mixture of tenses. Sentence 6A is one such example:

6a. *Although I *was* very young and I *don't* know what *is* going on but I *can* fee little.

In this sentence, we have two different tenses: the past tense and the present tense. Since the tense of the introductory clause is in the past tense, the reader expects the tenses of the other clauses to be also in the past. However, we notice an unexpected tense switch in the three clauses that follow the introductory clause. The introductory clause is diagrammed below to show how its tense should control the tenses of the lower clauses:

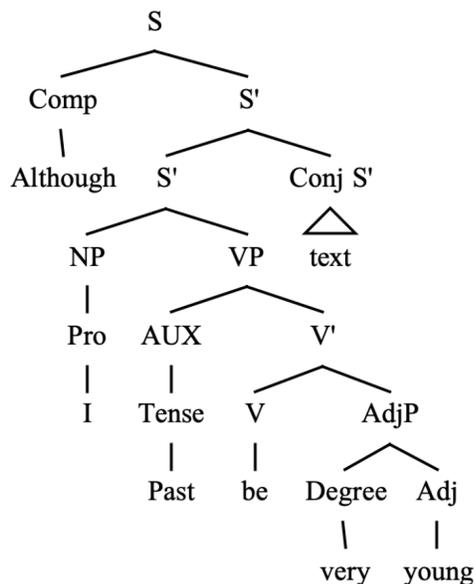


Figure 2: Tense Agreement Issues 1

Since the tense of the first S' is in the past, all the lower S', that is, the verbs in the lower clauses should all be in the past tense. However, what we see is an unnecessary switch between tenses, from the past to the present. Koffi (2015:167) defines an auxiliary verb as a verb that helps the main verb to fulfill certain duties, one of which is carrying tense information on behalf of the main verb. Since the verb <be> sets the tone for the past tense, the auxiliary verbs <do>, <be>, and

<can> should also be in the past tense. If tenses are made to agree, the resulting sentence will read as follows:

6b. I *didn't* know what *was* going on but I *could* <feel a³> little.

A paired down sentence diagram of Sentence 6b is shown in Figure 3:

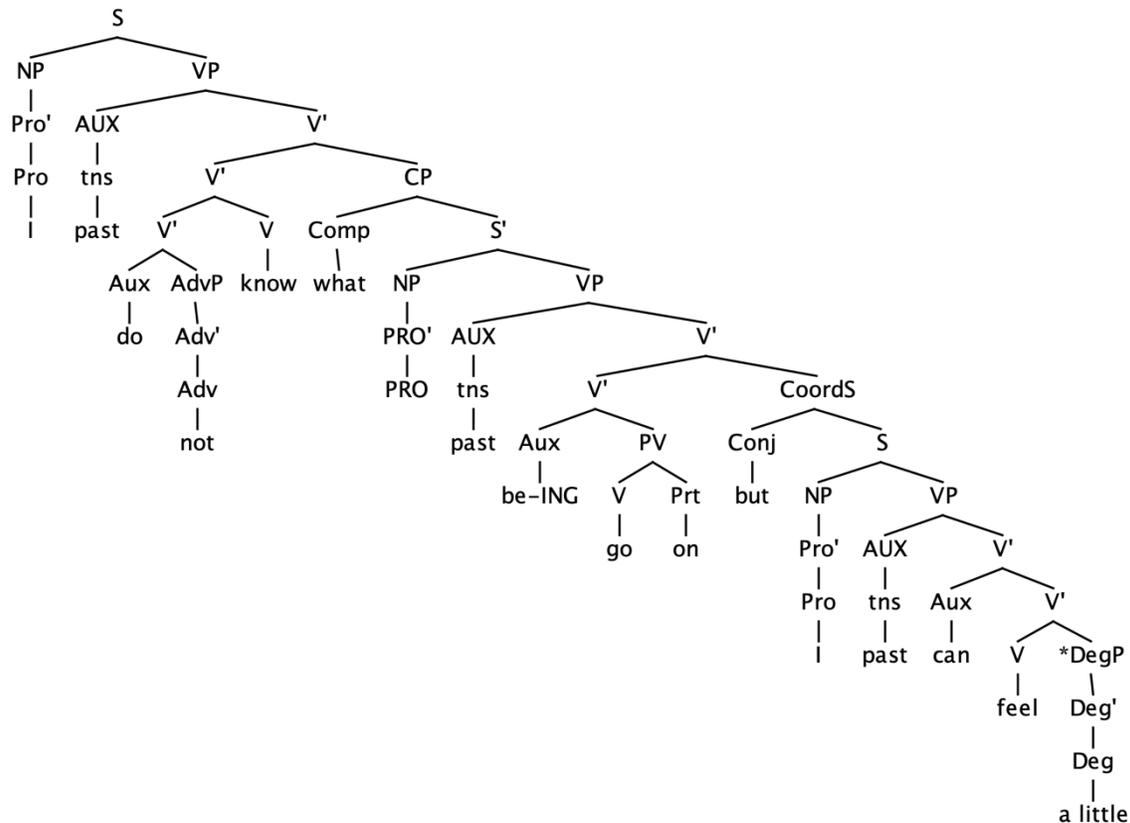


Figure 2: Tense Agreement Issues 2

We see here that all the AUX categories in all the utterance contain the tense category Past. In essence, there are three AUXs, each with its tense indicated as Past. Tree diagrams such as Figure 3 can be used to teach tense agreement to ELL students. Starting with the higher AUX that contains the past tense, students can be taught that all lower AUXs must have past tense because the first verb in the sentence is inflected for a past tense. Here is another example in the essay where tenses do not agree:

7a. *I *was recording* every single thing I *see* on my eye

³ I am making the assumption that the author meant <feel a little> (misspelling of <feel> and omission of <a>).

Since the first verb is in the past progressive and the sentence is describing two things that took place simultaneously, the second verb should also be in the past tense. The correct form of the sentence should be:

7b. I *was recording* every single thing I *saw* with my eyes⁴

It is diagrammed below as Figure 4:

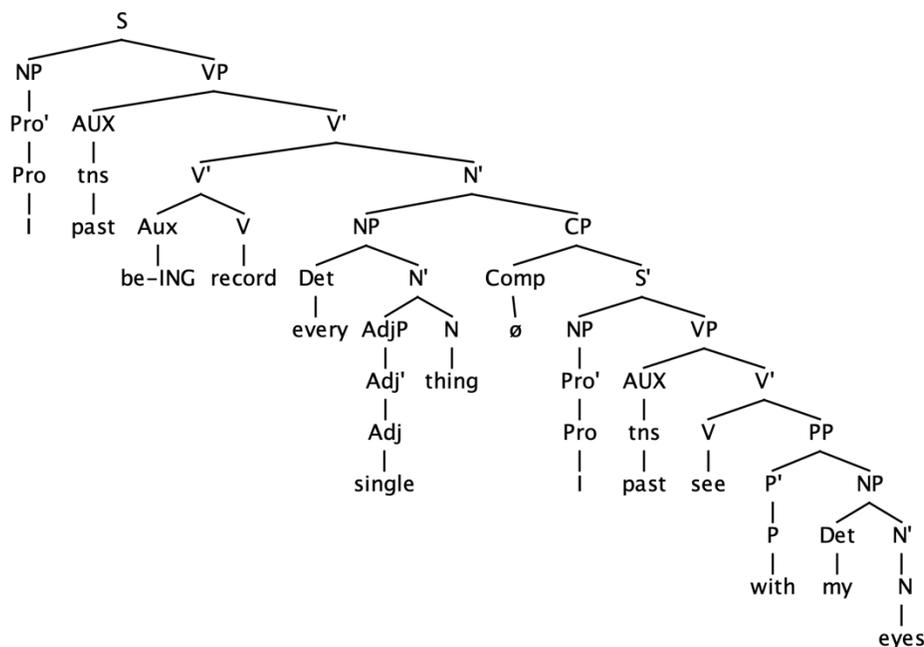


Figure 4: Tense Agreement Issues 3

Tense agreement issues are pervasive in this essay. Additional examples include the following:

- 8a. *no body *knowns* where he/she *was going* and what they *can* do.
- 8b. *as some international channels *reported* some people die with out shelter while others *eta* wild animal like lion, because they *don't* have ability that they *can* protect them selves.
- 8c. **was* most beautiful and best city in East Africa at that time ... immediately *changes* as bomb market where government and rebels *killing* anybody they *see*.
- 8d. *There *was* a wisdom *says* ...
- 8e. *The things *going* to worst while some Jihadth *refused* ...

The sentences above are corrected to read respectively as follows:

⁴ To make the sentence grammatical, I changed <on> to <with> and made <eye> plural.

- 9a. nobody *knew* where he/she *was going* and what they *could* do⁵.
 9b. as some international channels *reported*, some people *died* without shelter while others *were eaten* by wild animals, like lions, because they *didn't* have the ability to *protect* themselves.⁶
 9c. *was* the most beautiful and best city in East Africa at that time ... immediately *changed* into a bomb market where the government and rebels *killed* anybody they *saw*⁷
 9d. There *is* a proverb that *says*⁸ ...
 9e. Things *got* worse while some Jihadis *refused*⁹ ...

5.0 Pedagogical Implications and Applications

Spelling plays an important role in understanding a piece of writing. When a text contains too many spelling errors, the credibility of the author is in jeopardy. Readers are lenient when it comes to ELL writing. Even so, certain errors are not expected, especially for a high school graduate such as the author of Essay #9. There are many ways to help ELL students improve their spelling so as to minimize the number of orthographic errors in their writing. One way is suggested by Spacey (2018), “The more your students see and read words, the more they’ll be able to spell them correctly.” Spacey also suggests practical activities to increase students’ exposure to new words. For this, it is recommended that students be given vocabulary lists. Also, when students are listening to a song/show/movie/etc, they are encouraged to make note of unfamiliar words. Spelling is important. Therefore, every effort should be made to teach ELL students to spell commonly occurring words.

The issue of the inflectional plural suffix <-s> is very common among English L2 speakers. Many do not achieve native-level mastery of the plural morpheme even after years of exposure to English (Jia 2003:1298). Perhaps more attention needs to be brought to this issue so that it can be better addressed in ESL/ELL programs. It would be helpful to explain the differences between the L1 and L2 plural grammar rules, if known. I think it is also important not to overwhelm the students with all the irregular English plurals at the start. Instead, the focus should first be on regular patterns. When they are mastered, then and only then should common irregular forms be introduced. All along, the student should practice using the plural form in a variety of ways, such as identifying plurals while reading and writing short journal entries. The practice should go on for several times a week, with prompts that will stimulate the use of plural nouns. The errors seen in Essay #9 show that this issue needs to be targeted early and often. Practice should continue until the plural rule is fully mastered. In fact, it is hard to explain why a person who has graduated from an American high school and is college bound still makes English plural mistakes such as the spelling of <eyes>. These mistakes show that plural inflection errors demand pedagogical attention.

The problem of verb tense switching among ESL students was studied by Chappell and Rodby (1982:1). Their recommendations are that teachers should avoid contextless explanations or exercises on verb tense, and that the students’ own writing be used to provide the best basis for

⁵ Additional changes made for grammaticality.

⁶ Additional changes made for grammaticality.

⁷ Additional changes made for grammaticality.

⁸ Additional changes made for grammaticality.

⁹ Additional changes made for grammaticality.

working on verb tense problems. They provide three useful guidelines for helping ELL students with unnecessary tense switching are:

1. Avoid single sentence exercises (students will think tense choices can be made on a sentence-by-sentence or clause-by-clause basis)
2. Use paragraph-length excerpts from authentic discourse - students can discuss tense use/tense shifts
3. Have students write in drafts – the first draft will be what they want to do/say, as they revise, they will keep readers' needs in mind with respect to tense and clarity (Chappell and Rodby1982: 16-18)

6.0 Summary

The examples throughout this paper provide insights into how much of an impact syntax can make on L2 composition. ELLs are bound to make mistakes when writing. Regardless of the source of the errors, whether they come from a lack of English grammar knowledge or are L1 transfer errors, they need to be identified and remedied. By identifying errors throughout a piece of writing, patterns can be drawn, and a systematic approach can be created for correcting them. The pedagogical applications suggested above aim to do just that. It is more beneficial to the student to address the root of the problem, such as L1 transfer into L2, metalanguage, unacquired grammatical notions, etc., than to continually harp on individual errors. It behooves ESL teachers to do their best to ensure their students are capable of producing quality L2 writing. ELL students' credibility depends to a large extent on the written pieces that they produce either at school or on the job.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Megan Dell'Acqua is a graduate student in the TESL/Applied Linguistics program at St. Cloud State University, MN. She earned a BA in Foreign Languages/Literature (Spanish) from West Virginia University and an AA in Hebrew from the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in Monterey, CA. She spent seven years serving in the US Navy as a Language Analyst followed by two years as a contractor for the Department of Defense working in counterintelligence and cyber. She can be reached at megan.dellacqua@go.stcloudstate.edu and megan.dellacqua@gmail.com.

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