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Luis M. Lopez
St. Cloud State University

Galyna Arabadzhy
Saint Cloud State University

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VERB TENSE AGREEMENT ISSUES IN SOMALI L2 ENGLISH COMPOSITION

LUIS LOPEZ AND GALYNA ARABADZHY¹

ABSTRACT

Creating a piece of writing is an arduous task that presents challenges to both native and non-native speakers of English. Although there is enough material to help learners structure and organize their essays, English language learners (ELL) face surface level and sentence level issues. The purpose of this paper is to investigate two such issues, specifically orthographic and tense agreement mistakes produced by college-bound Somali students. The analyses reveal that phonological L1 transfers can affect orthography, while L1 syntactic structures interfere with tense agreements in complex sentences.

Keywords: ELL Composition, Orthographic Mistakes, Tense Agreement, Tense Switching, L1 Syntax Transfer

1.0 Introduction

Many studies have confirmed that language transfer plays a significant role in second language composition. Transfers can either be positive or negative depending on the similarities and differences of the L1 and L2 features. Analyzing negative transfers in composition can help language educators be aware of the issues learners face when asked to produce a piece of writing in the L2. In this paper, we analyze orthographic and syntactic elements in two essays produced by Somali learners of English. The essays are provided in the Appendices A and B. The paper is divided into two sections. The first section briefly addresses orthographic errors, while the second one deals with tense-agreement issues. The paper concludes with the pedagogical application section.

2.0 Orthographic Issues

We found 16 orthographic mistakes in the two essays. The total word count in both essays is 385, which results into a spelling error rate of 4.24%. All mistakes are shown in their order of appearance in Table 1 below. Dell'Acqua (2022, p. 2) states that “spelling and punctuation are very important components of writing because 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.”

No.	Orthographic Mistake	Correct Spelling	Frequency
1.	some	same	1
2.	juss	just	1
3.	lelf	left	3
4.	aportunity	opportunity	1
5.	money	many	2

¹ This paper originated in the Pedagogical Grammar course taught by Dr. Ettien Koffi. We would like to thank him for editing it and recommending it for publication.

6.	rescim	racism	1
7.	traibalism	tribalism	1
8.	paerticipate	participate	1
9.	regim	regime	1
10.	obama	Obama	1
11.	thing	think	1
12.	then	than	1
13.	betterment	improvement	1

Table 1: Orthographic Mistakes

Some of the mistakes can be considered minor ones, as is the case of those in Table 1. Most of them relate to phonological errors based on a sound-grapheme correspondence. Though the flow of the reading is affected when one finds these mistakes in the middle of the text, they do not make the sentences totally incomprehensible. For this reason, we will not provide further comments on spelling issues.

3.0 Tense-Agreement Issues in Complex Sentences

Steele (1978, p. 610) defines agreement as the “systematic covariance between a semantic or formal property of one element and a formal property of another.” Agreement in tense is important as the main verb in a complex sentence subcategorizes the tense of verb in the subordinate clause, and both verbs establish the time of the actions being performed or described. Shifting tenses in the verbs of complex sentences creates confusion and hinders the reader’s comprehension of the text, as is exemplified by Sentence 1:

Sentence 1: **As I read this passage I see just 11 language are spoke by more than half the earth’s population.*

In this complex sentence, the introductory clause governs the tense of the subsequent clause. In other words, since the introductory clause is used in the past tense, the verb of the clause that follows should also be in the past tense. However, in the student’s sentence, we see a tense switch between the verb of the first clause and the verb of the second clause. Since the verb of the initial clause is in the past tense, we expect the verb of the second clause to be in the past tense also, as shown by the tree diagram in Figure 1:

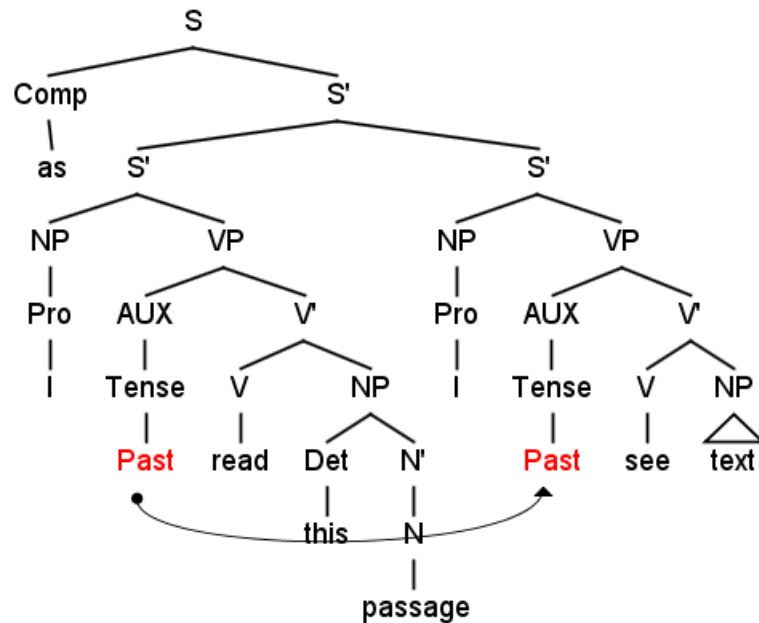


Figure 1: Illustration of Tense-Agreement Issues 1

However, the student failed to make the two verbs agree in tense. Normally, the verb of the second clause should be changed from <see> to <saw>, as indicated in the tree diagram. Another issue with the sentence is the failure of the student to use the past participle. Instead of “11 language are spoke,” it should be “11 languages are spoken.” We note in passing that it should be “11 languages” not “11 language.” However, since this is not a tense agreement issue, we do not dwell on it.

Sentence 2 also has a tense problem. The tense-agreement issue here is most likely due to a negative transfer from Somali syntax.

Sentence 2: **I wish I can see that and I will be more happy in my entire life.*

Saed (1999, pp. 210, 255) notes that, when verbs such as <doon>, which means “to want,” or “to wish” are used, the verb in the following sentence does not change its form. However, this is not so in English. When the verb <wish> occurs in the first clause, it causes the verb of the second clause to undergo a tense change. The changes that are to take place are highlighted in red in the tree diagram in Figure 2:

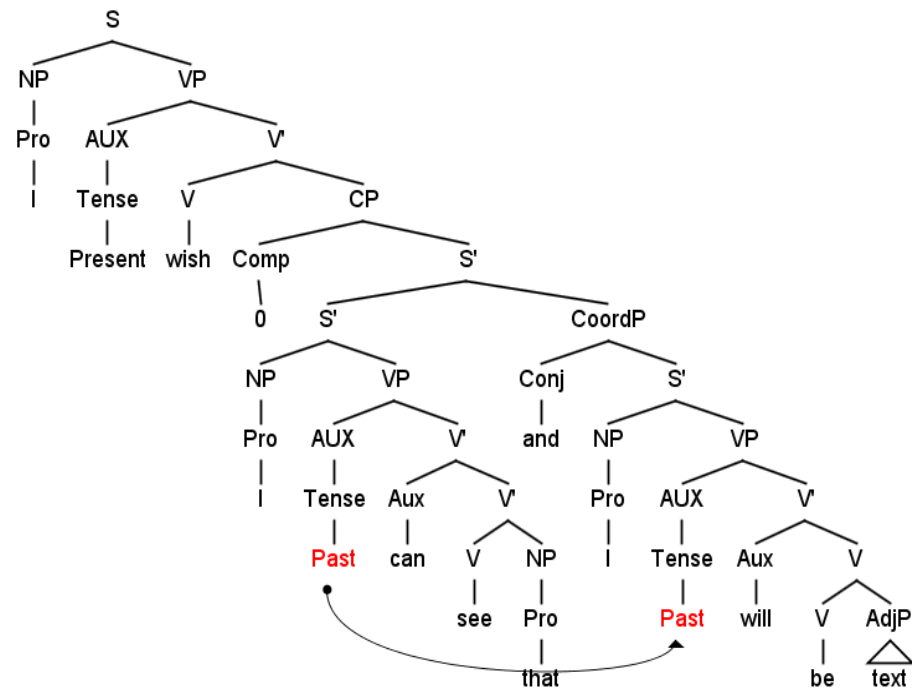


Figure 2: Illustration of Tense-Agreement Issues 2

The use of the verb <wish> calls for the **irrealis mood**. This mood requires the verb in the subordinate clause to be inflected with a past tense morpheme. Since the Somali verb <doon> does not have such a requirement, the student transferred the syntactic construction of <doon> into English. This explanation is plausible but speculative because we do not know for sure if the student composed his/her sentence mentally in Somali before translating it into English.

Sentence 3 is from the second essay. The sentence itself is long, with multiple layers of sentence complexity. However, we ignore these issues and focus on the adverbial clause introduced by <since>:

Sentence 3: * *one thing that lead them to be with out government since 1991 siyad bare regim collapse was that, they divided into communities or tribes and each tribe needs to govern the country.*

“Since” introduces a demarcation in time. The temporal landmark is 1991. Because of this, the verb in the initial clause should be <led>, not <lead>. There is another tense-agreement issue in the same sentence. The verb <collapse> should be in the past tense and written as <collapsed>. Koffi (2015, p. 177) claims that L2 learners “rely more on pragmatics than on verbal morphology,” and this causes the occurrence of the issue described. Since 1991 is in the past, in some languages, the form of the verb does not need to be changed because pragmatic tense trumps verb tense. However, this is not the case in English. For this reason, a tree diagram such as the one in Figure

3 should be drawn to reinforce the fact that pragmatic tense and verb tense should go hand-in-hand in English:

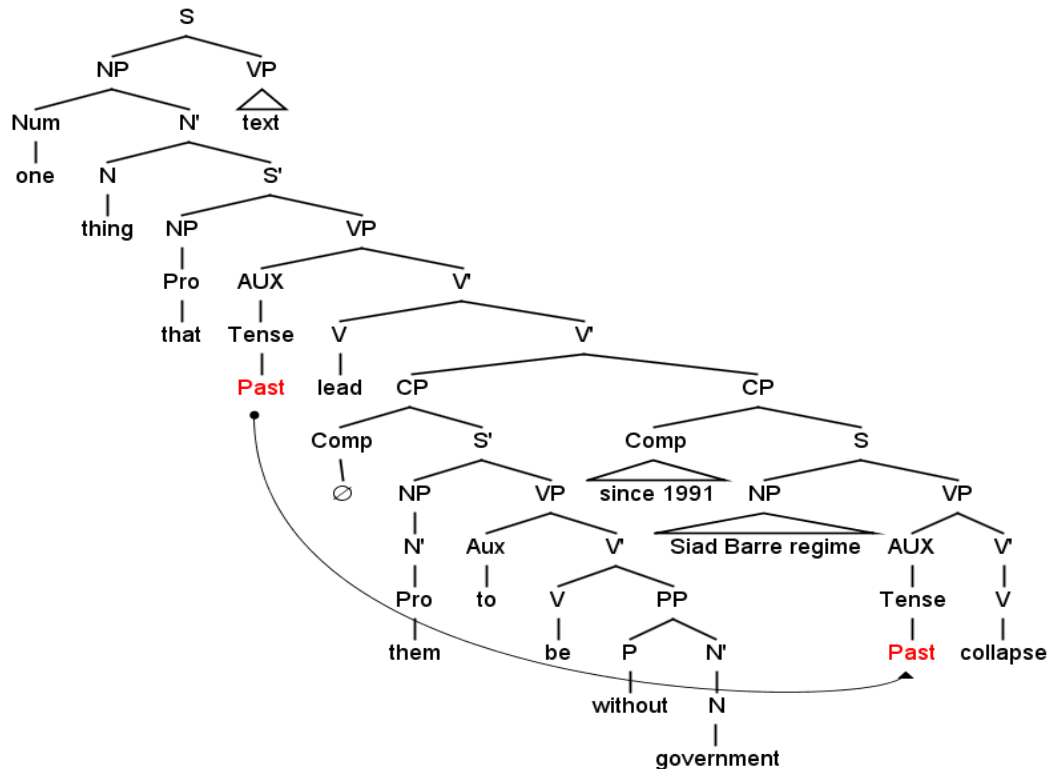


Figure 3: Illustration of Tense-Agreement Issues 3

4. Pedagogical Applications

Two pedagogical applications and implications emerge from the topics covered in this paper. The first has to do with spelling and the second with tense agreement. As for spelling, Herrington & Macken-Horarik (2015) suggest that spelling should be based on a linguistically informed approach, specifically on phonemic awareness methods. As for tense agreement, Chappell and Rodby (1982, pp. 16-18) provide three useful guidelines directed towards teaching ELL writers:

1. Teachers should avoid giving students single sentence exercises. Such exercises mislead students into thinking that tense choices can be made on a sentence-by-sentence or clause-by-clause basis.
2. Teachers should use paragraph-length excerpts from authentic discourse for students to discuss. Teachers should help students observe patterns of tense agreement.
3. Teachers should have students produce many drafts. The first draft will contain tense agreement errors which are highlighted. Then students should be asked to revise their own work by keeping readers' needs in mind with respect to the use of tenses and clarity.

5. Summary

The essays analyzed in this paper illustrate how a syntactic approach can help understand ELL composition problems and find solutions to them. Writing is an aspect of language acquisition that is more often tested than taught. The analyses proposed here have shed some light on the lack of verb tense agreement in Somali ELL writers' sentences. It is posited that such errors occur as a result of syntactic transfer. Our preliminary research shows that in complex sentences in Somali, the tenses of the verb remain the same. For instance, the verb <doon> does not call for the verb in the following clauses to have a different tense. Also, when a temporal adverbial marker is used in an utterance, pragmatic tense prevails. Therefore, there is no need for the verb to undergo tense agreement. However, English has different requirements. Tree diagrams such as those in Figures 1, 2, and 3 can be diagrammed to make students notice that the tense of the verbs in the different clauses must match. Spelling issues are pervasive. This means that teachers of Somali ELL students must find a better way of teaching spelling because these orthographic issues detract from their essays and lower the overall quality of their writing.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Luis Lopez is a Graduate Assistant at the English Department at St. Cloud State University, MN. He earned his B.S. in English at Universidad de El Salvador. He taught English as a second language for a decade at Universidad Catolica de El Salvador, and he is also an experienced Spanish teacher. His areas of interest include second language acquisition (SLA), Spanish phonology, Spanish phonetics, second language phonology, and language structure. Currently, Luis is completing his M.A. in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at St. Cloud State University, MN. He can be reached at luis.lopezparada@go.stcloudstate.edu or lmlopezparada@gmail.com.

Galyna Arabadzhy is a Graduate Assistant at the Intensive English Center and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program at St. Cloud State University, MN. After earning her B.A. in English from Mariupol State University (Ukraine), Galyna joined an edtech startup as Lead Instructional Designer. Her extensive experience in synchronous and asynchronous online education shaped her interest in learning technologies. Currently, she is completing her M.A. in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at St. Cloud State University, MN. She can be reached at arabadzhy@go.stcloudstate.edu or galyna.arabadzhy@gmail.com.

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Appendix A

Essay #1: A Universal Language

First it might be nice if everyone in the world spoke the same language. Just 11 languages for the entire world. I agree with the expert to have one language entire world. Also, I will like to see the entire world spoke English, because that is the more popular language. Next, As I read this passage I see just 11 languages are spoken by more than half the earth's population but, a few are being left behind as we become a more homogeneous, global society. For example, the ones who are left behind are like Africa. Africa are poor countries, and they don't have power language that makes them poor. Finally, if we all spoke one language entire world, that language could be English. We will have more opportunity. Also, we will understand each other and no one is left behind. I wish I could see that and I will be more happy in my entire life.

Appendix B

Essay #2: Democracy

The only way that can change in a society and its members or individual is democracy, that can bring them together to achieve the goals. In fact, the money thing you need to be a community or society example you have to ask. Yourself what can make people to be together all their life time and can't create conflict such as religion politics and cultural economic or technological nature and that what makes these countries better all over the world, no racism or tribalism, or no white or black people have equal opportunity. In fact these are money countries need to day or community to participate democracy like my country which has had civil war in many years, and one thing that led them to be without government since 1991 Siyad Barre regime collapse was that, they divided into communities or tribes and each tribe needs to govern the country. In addition to that the key of our life as a member of society or community or to achieve your goals is to get democracy all over the world. To get our hopes as individual like President Obama, who couldn't get this opportunity anywhere other than these countries, and these are all people who need to go one direction, can desire to do for their betterment as a nation or as individual,