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BE-COPULA AND PREPOSITION OMISSION IN SOMALI L2 ENGLISH COMPOSITIONS

OTHNIEL WILLIAMS¹

ABSTRACT

As a prospective Minnesota-licensed English as a second language (ESL) teacher, I believe that it is very important that the writing patterns of Somali students are studied because they are a major portion of the population of ESL learners in the state. This study examined three essays that were written by Somali students as part of their writing placement test for college. A plethora of issues were found, but the focus is on orthographic matters, the missing lexical auxiliary <Be> and the preposition <in>. The orthographic matters include problems with spelling and capitalization, which are common in all three essays. The omission of the lexical auxiliary <Be> occurred in two of the essays, while the omission of the preposition <in> was found in one essay. The paper explains what these issues are, what factors might have contributed to the issues, and what the issues mean for ESL teachers.

Keywords: Be-Omission in Somali L2 English Compositions, Somali L2 English Preposition Errors, Somali L2 English Spelling Errors

1.0 Introduction

This final paper examines three essays that were written by Somali students who graduated from a Minnesotan high school. The essays were composed as part of the students' writing placement test for college. The Somali population in the US has been increasing since the outbreak of the 1990s civil war, accompanied by years of famine, floods and drought in Somalia (Yusuf, 2021). The International Institute of Minnesota (2017) reports that there may be as many as 150,000 Somalis living in the state. Therefore, as a prospective Minnesota-licensed English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, it is very important that I study the writing patterns of Somali students. Analysing their writing will increase awareness of common Somali ESL students' writing errors, which will help me develop teaching strategies to assist them. The following section of the paper will address the writing errors that were found in the essays of the college-bound Somali students and the factors that might have contributed to the identified errors. The paper will close with suggestions regarding how ESL teachers can minimize these errors in English language learners' writing. A plethora of writing issues were found in the Somali ESL students' essays, but the focus of the analysis is on orthographic matters, the missing lexical auxiliary <Be> and the missing preposition <in>. The organization of the paper mirrors these three types of issues found in the three writing samples.

2.0 Description of the spelling errors

The orthographic matters include problems with spelling and capitalization, which are common in all three essays. Improper spelling distracts readers and affects their judgments of both writing quality and ability (Figueredo & Varnhagen, 2005). However, sentences containing misspellings can easily be read if the spelling error does not disrupt the overall structure of the word because some misspelled words can even be restored subconsciously to their correct form (Tat & Azuma, 2012). Examples of misspelled words from the students'

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

writings were <aportunity> and <lelf> from the first essay, <rescim> and <perticipate> from the second essay, and <anothe> and <creats> from the third essay. Based on the comments from Tat and Azuma (2012), it could be argued that <perticipate> is an example of a misspelled word that is restored subconsciously since it is not far from the correct form.

2.1 Possible factors that contributed to the spelling errors

Kreiner et al. (2002) identify two categories of spelling errors: phonological and typographical. According to them, phonological errors are those in which a word is still pronounceable but has a non-standard spelling that could be expected from a child or a nonnative speaker of English, while typographical errors render a word unpronounceable as an English word and may be expected as the result of hurried typing or poor motor control. It could therefore be concluded that <aportunity> and <perticipate> are phonological spelling errors that were made based on how the words are pronounced, while <lelf> is a typographical error because <lelf> is not an English word. We surmise that the target word is <left>.

2.2 Description of the capitalization errors

Among the orthographic issues are capitalization errors. For example, the writer of the first essay wrote, “*Next, As I read this passage...*” The issue with this written expression is the inappropriate capitalization of the word <As> which is found in mid-sentence. Another example is “*president obama*” in the second essay. This is an error because people’s titles when they are used before a personal name without a comma should be capitalized (Pathan, 2021), and proper nouns which include people’s names should also be capitalized.

2.3 Possible factor that contributed to the capitalization errors

According to Pathan (2021), most ESL learners are simply unaware of proper use of capitalization; hence, they make these errors in their writing. He conducted a survey to find out the most frequent capitalization errors made by ESL learners. The study, conducted among 230 undergraduate students at Bangladesh Agricultural University, revealed that 40.43% of English language learners did not capitalize people’s titles before a personal name without a comma. This previous study confirmed that this error is not unique to the Somali ESL students.

3.0 Description of the missing lexical auxiliary

English has just a small number of auxiliary verbs (Koffi, 2015). The lexical auxiliaries in English, which are sometimes referred to as helping verbs, are <Do>, <Have> and <Be>. Examples of sentences from the students’ essays with a missing lexical auxiliary are:

Essay 1: **“because that the more popular language”*

Essay 2: **“that what make these country”*

The missing auxiliary in both constructions is <Be>.

The example taken from Essay 1 can be corrected as follows:

* *“... because that **is** the more popular language”*

*“... that **is** the more popular language”*

Below is a tree diagram of the corrected construction.

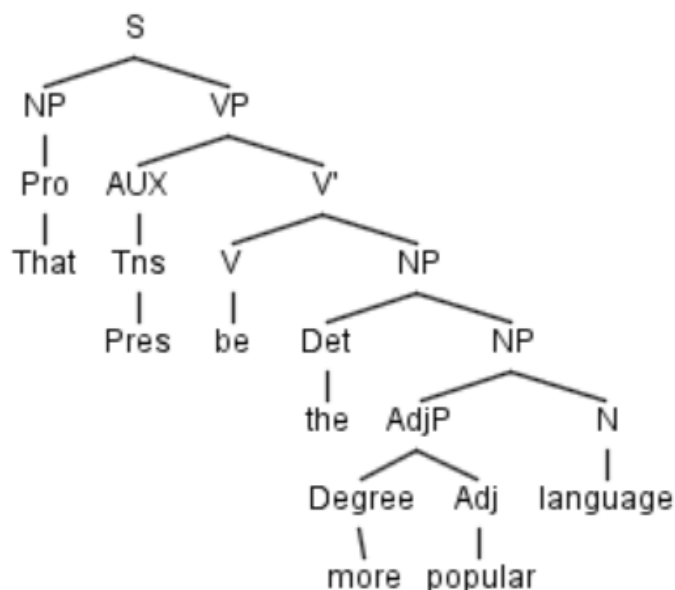


Figure 1: Sentence with a Missing Auxiliary Verb

The copular verb <Be> must necessarily occur in this sentence; otherwise, the sentence would not have a verb. Well-formed sentences in English must obligatorily have a verb.

3.1 Possible factors that contributed to the missing lexical auxiliary

Dulay et al. (1982) note that auxiliaries are more likely to be omitted than content words, especially by beginning ESL students. Since auxiliary verbs do not contain the main information of the sentence, it is understandable that they are often eliminated. It could also be argued that students avoided using the lexical auxiliary because they do not know when or how to use it.

Another possible factor could be Somali students' exposure to African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Be-copula absence, also called "zero copula" (Katz, 2020, p. 131), is a syntactic feature of AAVE. While the forms of the verb <is> and <are> usually occur in General American English, they are often absent in AAVE (Yule, 2014). Therefore, the Somali student writers might have omitted the Be-copula due to extensive contact with African Americans. The same pattern has been found among Puerto Rican adolescents. Wolfram and Schilling (1994) report that due to contact with AAVE, Puerto Ricans in New York tend to omit <Be> in their speech.

3.2 Description of the missing preposition

Prepositions can be defined simply as closed class words that indicate a relation between two words, the last of which must be a noun (Koffi, 2015). An example of a construction with a missing preposition was:

* *"one language entire world"*

The above error can be corrected as:

"one language in/for the entire world"

Below is a tree diagram that represents the deep structure of the corrected expression.

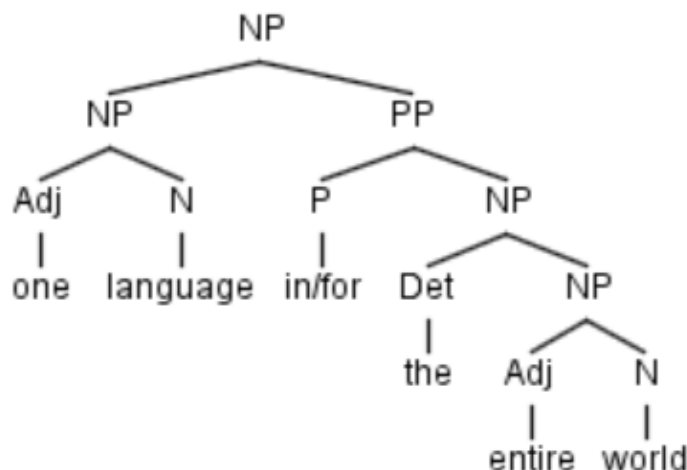


Figure 2: Sentence with a Missing Preposition

3.3 Possible factors that contributed to the missing preposition

Several factors might have contributed to the missing preposition. Korver (2013) opines that some reasons for Somali ESL students’ struggle with prepositions include fear of using them incorrectly, simply not knowing when to use them, and not being exposed to the necessary prepositions in English.

While those contributing factors have some merits, the number of prepositions in Somali versus the number in English might be the reasons why students omit them. Hunter (1880, p. 37) indicates that “There are but few real prepositions in Somali, and those may be almost called verbal particles, as they appear inseparable from that part of speech; they are *ku* (in, into, on, at, by, with), *ka* (from), *u* (to, towards, for), and *la*, (with, along with). Conversely, according to (Koffi 2015, p. 305) English has 60 to 70 prepositions. It could be argued that this massive difference in the number of prepositions in the first language and the target language makes the acquisition of English prepositions challenging.

Additionally, syntactic issues arise. In English, “prepositions occur before a noun” (Koffi, 2013, p. 305); however, “the four prepositions in Somali must be placed before a verb or an adjective indicating the kind of relation that holds between this verb or adjective and a noun or noun phrase” (Nilsson, 2021, p. 112). This distinction also adds to the complexities of English prepositions for Somali ESL learners.

Lastly, thematic roles differ. Thematic role analysis provides a reliable semantic test for identifying prepositions, and one such role is location – the place where an object or a person is found (Koffi, 2015). Conversely, the locative forms in Somali are the dative forms sometimes assisted by the preposition <ku> (Hunter, 1880, p. 15). In a preceding paragraph, it was mentioned that <ku> means <in>, but in the Somali equivalent for “the man lives **in** the house (*ninkas agalki bu joga*), <ku> is not used. This may explain why in some instances, Somali writers omit the preposition altogether, especially if they are translating their sentences from Somali into English.

4.0 Pedagogical implications and Conclusion

This syntactic analysis of Somali ESL students’ writing has pedagogical implications. The following suggestions could be used to minimize the writing issues that were identified.

4.1 Improving spelling in the ESL classroom

Teachers could use the cover, copy, compare (CCC) strategy (Jaspers et. al, 2012) to minimize spelling errors. This strategy teaches students to observe the correct spelling of a word, to cover it, write it on a new page, and then compare the correct spelling to what they wrote. When done repeatedly, the correct spelling of the word will lodge into students' long-term memory.

4.2 Improving capitalization in the ESL classroom

Capitalization errors could be minimized in two ways. First, deliberately explain the rules of capitalization with the use of examples. Second, use correspondence journals, which are continuous exchanges of writings such as letters between students and people in other audiences. Correspondence letters give students an opportunity to practice conventions such as punctuation, capitalization, and grammar without penalty (Bloem, 2004).

4.3 Improving the use of lexical auxiliary verbs in the ESL classroom

Teachers should address these errors directly because they are “simplistic errors” (Korver, 2013, p. 30). A clear explanation to the learners who are struggling with this error could substantially decrease the number of errors within students' essays, resulting in sentences with correct syntactic constructions.

4.4 Improving the use of prepositions in the ESL classroom

Prepositions should definitely be taught in the classroom as they contribute to meaning and untangle many syntactic ambiguities (Koffi, 2013). Lorincz and Gordon (2012) propose that prepositions could be taught using one of or a mixture of three approaches: traditional, collocation, and prototype.

The traditional approach to teaching prepositions is through explicit grammar instruction. In this approach, students focus on learning prepositions individually within context, with no further expansion. However, Lam's (2009) study revealed that students who were taught using this traditional method had little confidence in their ability to properly use prepositions and had minimal retention rates.

Another way of teaching prepositions is to use collocations. This approach acknowledges that prepositions have multiple meanings. For example, instead of teaching a preposition as a single entity, students can be taught the phrasal verbs *to rely on*, *to wait on*, *to walk on*, *to work on*, or *to pick on*. The last proposed method is to teach prepositions in “an explanatory, semantically-based manner” which allows for deeper learning, increased learner confidence, and longer rates of retention (Lorincz & Gordon, 2012, p. 3).

4.5 Summary

To conclude, this paper analyzed orthographic issues and syntactic transfer that are present in Somali ESL students' writing. While the essays have spelling and capitalization issues which are not unique to Somali ESL students, they contain be-copula and preposition omissions due to the students' using syntactic patterns of their first language in their English compositions. The pedagogical suggestions made in this paper can be used by ESL teachers who teach Somali students – and other English learners, where applicable – to minimize orthographic and syntactic issues in English writing.

Othniel Williams is a graduate student at St. Cloud State University, majoring in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). As part of his areas of study, he has completed several courses in second language acquisition theories, TESL methods, TESL assessments, pedagogical grammar, second language vocabulary acquisition, sociolinguistics, computer-assisted language learning, and language and culture. This Jamaican teacher has taught writing courses at both the secondary and post-secondary levels for over four (4) years. He has a master's degree in English Language and a bachelor's degree in Journalism. He can be reached at othniel.williams@go.stcloudstate.edu or at othnielwilliams78@gmail.com.

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