

SYSTEMATIC ERRORS IN THE USE OF DEMONSTRATIVE ADJECTIVES BY NIGERIAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF FRENCH

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Abstract

This paper analyses some adjectival errors by the Nigerian undergraduate students of French. Various researchers have concentrated on the influence of first language on second language learners. In this study, it is the effect of the acquired second language on the third language that will be examined. The study is descriptive in nature. The research instruments adopted consist of questionnaire written by level III students of B.A. French at their linguistic immersion programme at Badagry, containing questions on French demonstrative adjectives. The analysis of the sample data relied on the theory of Interlanguage as promulgated by Corder (1973). The result of the work showed that the subjects of the study lack some fundamental knowledge on the use of gender, number and position of French demonstrative adjectives. It is also discovered that learners displayed relatively poor competence in the use of demonstrative adjectives in French due to error of overgeneralization of the rule, fossilization and poor mastery of the language. In the final analysis, most of the assumptions established by Corder (1973) on interlanguage by this study.

Keywords: *Interlanguage, Adjectives, Demonstrative Adjectives, French Language*

Résumé

Cet article analyse quelques erreurs d'adjectivation commises par les étudiants nigériens du premier cycle universitaire en français. Divers chercheurs se sont concentrés sur l'influence de la langue première des apprenants sur la langue seconde en apprentissage. Dans cette étude, il est question de l'effet de la langue seconde acquise sur la troisième langue qui sera examiné. L'étude est de nature descriptive. Les instruments de recherche adoptés consistent en un questionnaire rédigé par des étudiants du niveau III du B.A. Français dans leur programme d'immersion linguistique à Badagry, contenant des questions sur les adjectifs démonstratifs en français. L'analyse des échantillons de données s'est appuyée sur la théorie de l'Interlangue telle que promulguée par Corder (1973). Le résultat des travaux a montré que les sujets de l'étude manquent de certaines connaissances fondamentales sur l'utilisation du genre, du nombre et de la position des adjectifs démonstratifs en français. On découvre également que les apprenants ont fait

preuve d'une compétence relativement faible dans l'utilisation des adjectifs démonstratifs en français en raison d'une erreur de généralisation excessive de la règle, d'une fossilisation et d'une mauvaise maîtrise de la langue. En dernière analyse, la plupart des hypothèses établies par Corder (1973) sur l'interlangue ont été démontrées par cette étude.

Mots clés: *Interlangue, Adjectifs, Démonstratif Adjectifs, Langue française*

Introduction

Brown (2002) and Aronoff and Fudeman (2005) affirm that making errors is an unavoidable problem in foreign and second language learning. There is a degree of competence that is required from each learner which is an indication of his/her mastery of the language. This research, therefore, attempts to investigate adjectival errors by Nigerian undergraduates with a view to identifying their nature and peculiarities.

Very few studies have been conducted on the influence of L2 (English) on L3 (French) acquisition among Nigerian undergraduates of French, especially on the use of adjectives in French. As such, through empirical enquiry, this research aims at contributing to third language acquisition literature by providing new data – both quantitatively and qualitatively.

The Concept of Adjectives

An adjective is generally a word or group of words that qualify a noun or a pronoun. According to *Collins Easy learning French Grammar* (2004, p25) an adjective is a describing word that tells you more about a person or thing, such as their appearance, colour, size or other qualities...

Herring (2016) submits that “adjectives are used almost exclusively to modify nouns, as well as any phrase or part of speech functioning as a noun.” This infers that the ultimate goal of adjective usage in a language is to provide additional information about the noun, pronoun or any phrase functioning as a noun. On this note, their occurrences with the modified word, according to Herring (2016, p.305), could either be in the form of attributive (in which case the adjective appears before the

modified word(s)) or predicative (in which case the adjective appears after the modified word(s)).

The Concept of Error Analysis

It has been argued by scholars such as Jowitt (1991) that errors are some of the major occurrences in language learning. By extension, in the course of learning a second and/or third language, students constantly commit different categories of errors as they progress from one stage of learning to the next. It is on the basis of this that this research seeks to investigate the different categories of errors found in the written productions of Nigerian undergraduate students in relation to the use of French adjectives.

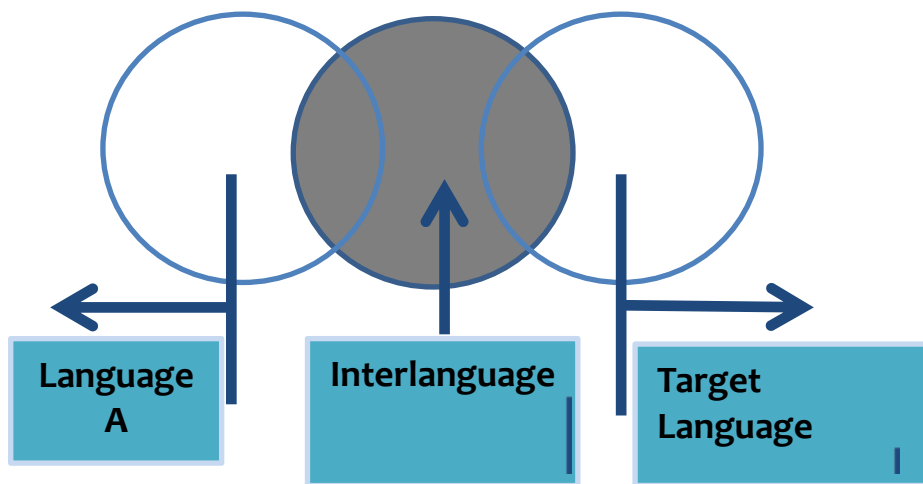
According to Gass and Selinker (2008, p. 102) “Error Analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners make”. Brown (1987, p. 17) defines error analysis as a “process through which researchers observe, analyse and classify learner errors in order to elicit some information about the system operating within the learner.” Corder (1981, p. 25) distinguishes between errors of performance and errors of competence by referring to the former as *mistakes* and the latter as *errors*. However, in contrastive analysis, the comparison is made with the native language. Looking at this in a new dimension, it can be submitted that the identification of errors is not always easy. Corder (1975, p.25) remarks that “a distinction must be made between errors, those of competence and mistakes that are part of performance.” We notice that the most obvious reason for the errors is interference of the previous language(s) into the learning of target languages. Corder (1973, p.256) distinguishes between errors and “mistakes”. In his 1971 studies, he classifies the sources of errors into Interlingual and Intralingual errors.

Interlingual Errors

Interlingual errors are those which can be attributed to the native language (i.e. they involve cross-linguistic comparisons). In other words, interlingual error results from language transfer that is which is caused by

the learner's previous language. We have all heard English learners say "sheep" for "ship"; French learners may say: "*Je sais Musa*" for "*Je connais Musa*." All these errors are attributable to negative interlingual transfer.

For the sources of this language system Selinker (1972) identified four possible areas of transfer that might shape the structure of interlanguage: transfer of one's native language or other languages the learner has already acquired, transfer of training, transfer of communication, and transfer of strategy. Nemser coined the term 'approximative system' for the language the learner is using, implying that the learner is engaged in a progressive process in the direction of the target language.



Interlingual errors, according to Keshavarz (1994, p.160) manifest themselves in three areas of language learning. They are as follows:

1. Transfer of Phonological Element

In phonology, there are certain features peculiar to individual language. Such features, according to Odlin (1989, p.113), may not be found in another language, or even if they exist in another language, they may take

new characteristics which again make them distinctive features in that particular language. This means that both their acoustic characteristics (the pitch of a sound) and articulatory characteristics (how widely the mouth is open in producing sound) may change in both languages. Thus, when these sounds are transferred from one language to another, they result in pronunciation error.

2. Transfer of Morphological Element

Some errors arise from morphological sources. This is supported by Fallahi (1991, p.125) when he states that “it can be a source of error when the semantic interpretation of some noun is collective in one language but the semantic interpretation of their equivalents in another language is sometimes collective and sometimes (these nouns) are count plurals”.

3. Transfer of Grammatical Element

Variations in grammatical structures are one of the main sources of interference error. Learners of a foreign language, transfer to a considerable extent, the grammatical elements of their previous learnt language into the target language (Fisiak, 1981, p. 20). Grammatical transfer concerns changes in the structure and the structural elements in the foreign language. It is caused by semantic and formal resemblances and distinctions between the native language and the foreign language system. These contrasts appear to be the source of errors like the following: “*Il remercie à sa mère*” instead of “*Il remercie sa mère*”. “*Ils aident à leur parents*” instead of “*Ils aident leur parents*” ; *Je n’ai pas de l’argent*” instead of “*Je n’ai pas d’argent*”.

Intralingual Errors

Intralingual errors are those that are, due to the language being learned, independent of the previous language. One would, therefore, expect similar intralingual errors to occur from speakers of a wide variety of first languages. Intralingual Error results from faulty or partial learning of the target language rather than from language transfer. Intralingual errors occurs when learners make errors under the influence of the already-learnt language knowledge and established habits in the foreign language:

“J’ai allé à la faculté” instead of *“Je suis allé à la faculté.”* *“Elle a tombé dans la rue”* instead of *“Elle est tombée dans la rue.”*

Drawing from the foregoing, the theoretical framework adopted for this research is based on the theory of Error Analysis promulgated by Corder (1971). Corder (1967, p.162) distinguishes three main phases in error analysis. Firstly, we must identify the errors, then we must classify them, and finally, we must interpret them in order to draw conclusions for the planning of teaching.

Methodology

The aim of this research is to examine adjectival errors made by Nigerian undergraduate students of French. Thus, this study is based on the survey of 300 level undergraduate students of French in their Linguistic Immersion at the French language village Badagry. The study is carried out by administering a test to the subjects of the research by given different questions to answer containing the demonstrative adjectives of the French language. The researcher, later, analysed the result and find the possible errors.

Data Analysis

In this part of our work, the researcher analyses the responses obtained through the questionnaires distributed to the subjects of our survey, namely the students of the 3rd year of study of Bachelor degree at French Language Village Badagry.

For easy identification, sentences that contain adjectival errors are marked with an asterisk and the actual errors in the sentence are written in bold. Furthermore, the sentences that contain the errors are tagged “1a, 2a and/or3a”, the correct of the sentences are tagged with “b” followed by the gloss of the words and then the English version (s) of the sentences are tagged with “c”.

Demonstrative Adjectives

Used to design, to present a person or things. According to Ajiboye

(2003) the class of words called “*adjectifs démonstratifs*” (Demonstrative Adjectives) are basically those determiners whose function is to refer back to a noun already discussed or to announce what is about to happen. In both cases, the idea is to “show” or “point up” the noun in question, hence the word “*démonstratifs*”. The demonstrative adjectives (*this, that, these and those*) are as follows:

Demonstrative adjective

| Masculine singular | | Feminine singular | Plural |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|--------|
| Before a consonant | Before a vowel or mute h | | |
| Ce | Cet | Cette | Ces |

Q1. J’aime roman.

- 1a. *J’aime **cet** roman
- 2a. *J’aime **cette** roman
- b. J’aime **ce** roman



J’aime *ce* (*masc. sing dem. adj.*) *roman* (*n. masc.sing.*).
I like this novel

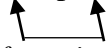
The response in question 1 contains only 2 instances of intralingual errors. The responses indicate that the students understand the gender and number of demonstrative adjectives. The result yielded a good response. In the sentences, there are two incidences of adjectival errors. Sentence 1a shows wrong use of demonstrative adjectives with a masculine noun commencing with consonant. Sentence 1a, « J’aime *cet roman* » instead of « J’aime *ce roman* » (this novel). The feminine form of the demonstrative adjective « *cette* » (this) in (2a) above is also badly used before a noun commencing with a consonant. The task of the students is to find the right adjective knowing already the gender of "roman". We, therefore, expect a large majority to pass.

Q2. Il a écrit pièce.

1a*Il a écrit **ce** pièce

2a*Il a écrit **cet** pièce

a. Il a écrit **cette** pièce



Il a écrit **cette** (*fem. sing. dem. adj.*) pièce (*n. fem. sing.*).

He wrote this play

The gender of the noun "pièce" (play) is feminine and it must also be marked by the demonstrative adjective "cette" (this). Some respondents wrote sentences (1a), other respondents wrote sentences (2a), while others respondents left the question blank. The distinction between masculine and feminine gender constitutes a problem that makes students commit such errors.

Q3. artiste travaille bien.

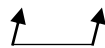
1a***Ce** artiste travaille bien

1b. **Cet** artiste travaille bien



Cet (*masc/fem. sing dem. adj.*) artiste (*n.sing. masc/fem*) travaille bien

2b. **Cette** artiste travaille bien



Cette (*fem. sing dem. adj.*) artiste (*n.sing. masc/fem*) travaille bien

This artist works well

The demonstrative adjective « ce » is masculine singular while the noun « artiste » (artist) can be either masculine or feminine, depending on the adjectives that describe it. But it is inadequate here because the word « artiste » begins with a vowel. The use of « ce » (this) will lead to hiatus which the French language always tries to avoid. The erroneous

sentences are as a result of ignorance of the rule restrictions and overgeneralization of words ended with letter –e as feminine. In addition, the students have two options in answering this question.

Q4. Je veux..... livres.

1a*Je veux **ce** livres

2a*Je veux **cette** livres

b. Je veux ces livres



Je veux *ces* (*pl. dem adj.*) livres (*n. masc. Pl.*).

I want these books

In sentence (1a), the gender of the noun « *livres* » (books) is masculine. The task of the students is to find the right adjective after knowing the gender of the noun. Few students did not distinguish between singular and plural of the noun. The second error came as a result of poor knowledge about the gender of the noun « *livres* » (books) and concord problem. The word « *livres* » which is masculine plural in the sentence goes along with demonstrative adjectives in masculine and plural too. The result yielded a good response.

Q5. animaux sont féroces

a. ***Cet** animaux sont féroces

b. Ces animaux sont féroces



Ces (*dem. adj.pl.*) animaux (*n. pl.*) sont féroces

These animals are ferocious

The error stemmed from the plural of the noun and mother tongue interference. May be the students transferred the system of their mother tongue like Hausa into the learning of the French language.

Q6. Parlez à enfant

a. *Parlez à ce enfant

1b. Parlez à cet enfant



Parlez à cet (*dem. adj. masc/fem*) enfant (*n. masc/fem.*).

2b. Parlez à cette enfant



Parlez à cette (*dem. adj.fem.*) enfant (*n. masc/fem.*).

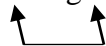
Speak to this child

Question 6 above yielded the highest good result. The inappropriate and wrong sentence has its source in transfer of training. It is very rare to see the noun « *enfant* » (child) preceded by a feminine gender marker « *cette* ». In addition, the students have the option of writing « *cet* » or « *cette* » (this) ; all this contributed to the good result we recorded : 97 good answers. The ungrammatical sentence « a » above is a result of the production of masculine demonstrative adjective « *ce* ».

Q7. église est vieille.

a.*Cet église est vieille

b. Cette église est vieille



Cette (dem. adj.fem.) église (fem. sing.n.) est vieille

This church is old

The gender of the noun « *église* » (church) is already defined by the adjective « *vieille* » (old) which is also feminine. Demonstrative adjective « *cette* » (this) has to be employed because the noun is singular and feminine. The error is due to overgeneralization as a result of application of the rule which stipulates that the feminine gender is marked by the addition of a final –e

Q8. robes sont belles.

1a. ***Cette** robes sont belles

2a. ***Cet** robes sont belles

b. **Ces** robes sont belles



Ces (*dem. adj.pl.*) robes (*n. fem. pl.*) sont belles

These dresses are beautiful.

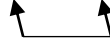
The fact that the gender of the noun « robe » (dress) is marked by the feminine adjective « belle » (beautiful). In addition, if the students know the meaning of « robe », there should be no problem as its gender is already defined in the sentence. Some respondents produced sentence (1a) above, and 1 student provided sentence (2a) and also some students did not answer the question. Incomplete learning leads to the inappropriate and unacceptable sentences. Those that made the errors were not able to distinguish between « beau » (handsome) and « belle » (beautiful) and did not know the formation of plural in adjectives in french.

Q9. Nous allons déjeuner dans restaurant.

1a. *Nous allons déjeuner dans **cet** restaurant

2a. *Nous allons déjeuner dans **cette** restaurant

b. Nous allons déjeuner dans ce restaurant



Nous allons déjeuner dans ce (*dem. adj.masc.sing.*) restaurant (*n.masc.sing.*).

We will take our lunch in this restaurant.

The preceding question contains two different errors. The noun « restaurant » is masculine singular. In response (1a), it is the insertion

of « *cet* » in the demonstrative adjective with a masculine noun that begins with consonant that makes the students failed. Six students write these wrong answers. The second response (2a) above, is the use of a feminine demonstrative adjective « *cette* » (this) which always goes with feminine singular noun. Seven respondents gave these answers. Incomplete learning leads to the inappropriate and unacceptable sentences. The preceding erroneous sentences are as a result of the ignorance of the rule or poor mastery of the language.

Q10. route va à Kano.

1a. ***Cet** route va à Kano

2a. ***Ce** route va à Kano

b. **Cette** route va à Kano



Cette (*dem. adj.fem.*) route (*n.fem. sing.*) va à Kano

This road takes to Kano

The above question gives two instances of errors. Fourteen (14) students do not get the right gender (feminine) of « route ». In the given sentences, the noun « route » ‘road’ is feminine singular and it requires a feminine singular demonstrative adjective « *cette* ». In the example (1a), respondents suppressed the morphological marker of feminine demonstrative adjective that has an oral correspondent with masculine demonstrative adjective that goes with a noun that begins with a vowel. There is an error in (2a), because the respondents are unable to distinguish whether the noun « route » (road) is feminine or masculine.

In the written productions of our subjects, we notice that some students do not sufficiently master the standard formation of demonstrative adjectives. Some of the students suppress the morphological marker of plural that does not have an oral correspondent: An adjective that qualifies a noun is put in the singular as question 5: « *Ces animaux sont féroces* » and in question 8: « *Ces robes sont belles* » (These robes are

beautiful).

From the examples above we can say that some students do not know how to recognize the feminine of some adjectives either because they are incapable of distinguishing between the masculine and the feminine, or because they do not know the standard morphological formation of words in French, as is the case of question 1. The word « roman » (novel), a singular masculine noun, preceded by the adjective « cette » instead of « *ce* ». The same error or lacuna is repeated in question 2, when the students write « *ce* » instead of « *cette* ». For examples 3, 6 and 7, students fail to make the correct use of the masculine and feminine adjective in front of a noun beginning with a vowel. In example 10, the masculine demonstrative adjective is placed where it is supposed to be feminine demonstrative adjective.

In this data analysis, we have seen the errors as expected as due to the lack of linguistic competence on French language learners. The analysis that we had done here made it possible to understand the evolution of the intra and interlingual errors of the learners as well as their level of grammar (adjectives) in a foreign language (French). These analyses highlighted the difficulties that learners encounter when producing written speeches in French.

In this study, therefore, the erroneous sentences were analysed in terms of intralingual and interlingual errors. (Corder, 1973:265) proposes two ways of interpretation of the learner's utterance (or writing):

- An authoritative interpretation in which the learner is asked to express his intentions in his mother tongue and then translate his utterance (or writing) into the target language.
- A plausible interpretation which is done in the absence of the learner. Using whatever we know about him and his knowledge of the target language we try to interpret what he intended to say from his utterance (or writing) and its context.

In our presentation and analysis, the plausible interpretation is adopted by giving the correct French sentence, its equivalent translation in English and the erroneous sentences produced by the students.

Conclusion

The identified errors are typical of intralingual and interlingual errors. As we have noticed, these errors have a close relationship with the second language of Nigerian learners (English). Indeed, the learner develops his own system of rules based on the similarities and differences they observe between their mother tongue, English and French, which reveals his insufficient knowledge of French. All these statements tell us about the difference between the learner's intention and his final output.

As a result we can say interference, simplification, fossilization, overgeneralisation of grammatical rules, transfer of training etc. are learning strategies that a non-Francophone learner uses, concisely or not, to solve his or her learning difficulties.

Generally speaking, adjective order in French and adjective order in English follow similar principles in some context. The closer an adjective comes to a noun in English, the closer it will come in French. Thus, in a simple world where all adjectives in English come before the noun, and all French adjectives come after the noun, the order of adjectives in French would be the mirror image of the order of the equivalent adjectives in an English sentence. As we have seen adjectives in French often come before the noun. Yet the principle remains valid. When organising three or four adjectives round a noun in French, try and keep the same relationship of proximity as in English, even though some of the adjectives may go before the noun and after it while others always come the noun it describe or modify.

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