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The 'rural-urban' mix in the use of prepositions and prepositional phrases by students of literature in Kenyan universities

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Abstract

The language of instruction at university level in the Kenyan education system is English, so all written work for assignments and examinations is generated in English. And yet, each student probably uses two or three languages in their everyday life in situations away from the classroom. Indeed, the language policy allows the use of mother tongue as language of instruction in Primary School classes One to Three. African languages are structured differently from the English language, particularly where prepositions are concerned. Furthermore, each language grows in a specific cultural context; and the range of vocabulary of the African languages in Kenya is different from that of English. This may present a challenge for university students using English as the language of instruction in understanding academic concepts for which there is no equivalent in their mother tongue. In some instances, only a single word is available in the first language, where several different English words are possible or even necessary for clarity depending on the context. This paper explores this cultural peculiarity of linguistic marginalisation, which is both lexical and syntactic, as manifest in the written research papers of university literature students who would otherwise work simultaneously in different languages.

Key words: communication, English, Kenya, literature, multilingualism, translation

INTRODUCTION

Young people between the age of twenty and twenty-five are generating artistic productions in many different ways; sometimes crossing two languages for a hybrid one such as Sheng in Nairobi. A good example is the performance from three men during the poetry seminar on 4th August at Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya: '*una* bore….' Another example is the spoken poetry of Richard, as recited at the St Paul's University chapel, Nairobi, on 16th August 2015. A

visitor from Malawi, and probably many of those present, did not understand a word of the recitation, which was about poor governance and lack of leadership.

This conundrum, the fact that such beautiful cultural artefacts cannot be understood and shared widely until and unless they are translated or placed in a conducive cultural context, is the core of the marginalization explored in this paper. Confronted with a similar phenomenon involving 'ethnic Chinese Singaporeans', Li Wei (2018:14) proposes 'Languaging as a practical Theory of Language' with reference to others such as Hall (1999), Swain (2006) and Thibault (2017), praising the 'connections Swain and others make between languaging and thinking, cognizing and consciousness' (Wei 2018:16), in recognition of the fact that 'language serves as a vehicle through which thinking is articulated and transformed into an artefactual form' (Swain 2006: 97).

Young people, university students in our study, get so carried away in language exercises that they write the same creative language, which Li Wei refers to as 'a site of creativity' (…) when working on academic assignments as they do when generating works of word art. For this paper, only a handful of phrases have been picked for illustration. These are phrases that I think I can understand and explain, perhaps due to the fact that I am well conversant with two languages in which similar constructions would be possible / have been effected.

The teaching of literature in the African context is a challenging task. In the first instance is the location of literature in the academy. When institutions of higher learning were first set up in modern Africa, they were set up in the linguistic hegemony of European academies. In the case of Kenya, for example, literature was 'English literature' much as it was taught in other English-speaking countries, which, as Hawthorn points out, was not necessarily what the general populace in England was reading (6). A quick search online reveals that the oldest universities in East Africa were initially colonial colleges of the University of London, eventually becoming the University of East Africa. On 1 July 1970, the University of East Africa was split into three, one for Uganda, one for Kenya, and one for Tanzania. Over time, it became clear that African writers were producing literature using colonial languages relatively new to them, but that this literature did not belong snugly inside the established canon of 'English literature' or 'French literature', for example. For this reason, in East Africa the study of word art, or literature, is housed in departments of Literature rather than English Studies. However, literature continues to be taught in the hegemonic language of English, which is acquired as a second or third language but continues to be used as the language of instruction in the Kenyan education system. This postcolonial reality is farther complicated by the fact that African literature is produced in many other hegemonic languages, not just in English as pointed out by Barber and others (in Ricard, viii-ix).

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The marginalisation which I describe is not that sentences are not grammatically constructed, although the phrases used for illustration may not be grammatically correct, but rather that unless the reader is conversant with the sentence structure of the language(s) the writer is thinking in at the moment of writing, there may be miscommunication. In the words of Li Wei, 'these examples look

English, but a monolingual [hegemonic] English speaker may find it difficult to understand precisely their meanings and connotations' (13).

The relevant illustrations will make it clear that this paper is not dealing with typos – unintended errors that happen at the point of data input, such as the addition of an 's' to a verb whose subject is in the plural. Below are some examples of such typing errors, picked from the same samples:

> My mother don't understand
> Such activities markets the school
> Members of the cast represents …

Furthermore, we are not dealing with learning shortcomings such as the two examples below:

1. A mother to her daughter as the daughter prepares for marriage,

   'Remember what I have teached you';

2. A *WhatsApp* conversation between siblings,

   A: Where are you going?
   B: To a photo-shoot.
   A: Who is being photoshooted?

In the examples given in 1 and 2 above, the sentence structure is that of the English language. The problem is in the spelling of specific words. In the first example, the second last word should be 'taught' while in the second example the last word should be 'photographed.'

There are many problems that learners face when trying to learn a new language. In the urban context in Kenya, there are at least three languages: the mother tongue; Kiswahili; and English. While English and Kiswahili may be familiar to most university students in Kenya, there are more than forty different language groups. This means that the resulting language experiments are as different as there are language groups (Omondi, 2005). Some, however, seem to be more widely spread than others. For example:

I: Prepositional phrases:

1. Some students write 'resort in' instead of 'resort to'
2. Some students write 'result to' instead of 'result in'

The Oxford dictionary provides the following pronunciation guidelines:

re'sort /rɪ'zɔ:rt/;
re'sult / rɪ'zʌlt/;

A close look at the two units reveals that the pronunciation of the word 'result' is so close to that of 'resort' that some students may not realise that they are dealing with two different words which mean different things. This confusing neutralisation may be further compounded by the fact that in the end the two verbs lead to some kind of result (noun) anyway.

II: Adding or omitting a preposition:

1. The verb 'discriminated' used without the preposition (discriminated against)
2. Sometimes a preposition is added to the verb 'emphasize' so that it becomes 'emphasize on' (for example, but not the correct 'put emphasis on').
3. The phrase 'the board is written…' easily translating into the Kiswahili *ubaoni imeandikwa* meaning 'on the board is written…'

III: Other interference-prone phrases/ sentence constructions:

1. The phrase 'teach me to cook' instead of 'teach me how to cook.' This can be related to the Kiswahili *Nifundishe kupika*.
2. The phrase 'I'm going to be shaved' instead of 'I'm going for a haircut'. The former can be easily related to the Kiswahili *Naenda kunyolewa*.
3. The statement, 'This book talks about …' probably from the Kiswahili *Kitabu hiki kinaongea kuhusu …*
4. Sometimes, at a public function, this phrase is heard even from prominent politicians: 'My names are,' probably from the Kiswahili *Kwa majina, naitwa…*

These few examples are representative of constructions commonly encountered in the written assignments submitted for marking by university students of literature. Indeed, this paper takes a look at the acquired habit of using English words but stringing them in an interlanguage structure that is not standard for English, usually that of a mother tongue. As can be seen in the above examples, the most basic of these constructions have verbs to which prepositions not generally associated with that verb, although they are valid prepositions in the English language, are added; or indirect verbs which are used without the idiomatic preposition; or direct verbs to which a preposition has been wrongly added. The most common prepositions of interference are: to; on; in; at.

The most common such phrase probably is 'me I.' Speakers of Kiswahili will identify with, and quickly recognise, the sentence structure. In Kiswahili, there is a tendency to introduce the subject before the verb is introduced, even though the verb is reflexive anyway. This is especially so in the first person: *Mimi sina makosa*; *mimi sijui…*; *mimi nataka chakula*. The Sheng version of these phrases then becomes: *mi sina makosa*; *mi sijui…*; *mi nataka chakula*. Predictably, those who then use Kiswahili, and especially the Sheng, regularly, sometimes end up making the statements: 'Me, I have no problem' (meaning it is not my fault); 'Me, I don't know…'; 'Me, I want food' (meaning I want food / I'm hungry).

Closely related to the above is the Kiswahili construction related to the word *nasikia*. The word *nasikia* means 'I hear.' For this word we need to go to a third language to understand how the problem develops. In some Bantu languages such as Kikamba, there is only one word for two different Kiswahili verbs *kuhisi* and *kusikia*. What this means is that when we communicate across three different languages, this word is then used either in Kiswahili or English in constructions that become an ambiguous negative tranfer. For instance, when someone is thinking in Kikamba *niiw'a nzaa*, he or she is likely to say in Kiswahili, *Nasikia njaa* instead of *nahisi njaa*. There are indeed many jokes to the effect that 'I am hearing hunger,' to mean 'I am hungry.' Many speakers of Bantu languages find it extremely difficult to relate to the English word 'hungry' as adjective, and commonly end up with the phrase, 'I am feeling hungry.'

It is useful to note that all illustrations presented in this paper are taken from take-away research assignments. Take-away assignments are not work written in a tense examination situation without benefit of a word processor; they are given out in class in the first week of the semester, to be submitted after ten

weeks. They are discussed and students have a chance to ask questions. Indeed, one of the samples is a computer generated paper. The student had access to spell-check functions which also check semantics and syntax. The student also had the time to proofread and edit his or her work. The quoted sentences are taken from what was finally submitted as the final copy.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The illustrations used for this paper are taken from take-away assignments of university students. Take away assignments are done over a period of ten weeks. The illustrations are not dealt with in any particular order since the nature of the linguistic marginalisation is neither related to level of study nor isolated in location. Below is a sample paragraph, taken from a paper dealing with theatre arts/performance:

> On the third week, we rehearsed the whole scene from the beginning to the end. I tried by guiding them and correcting their mistakes. After this rehearsal, we practiced and our play was now almost complete. We remained with the final rehearsal which we agreed to be on the following week. When the time reached we gathered again …

Below is a more comprehensible version of the above message, as understood by the researcher:

> We finally managed to run through the whole scene non-stop during the third week of rehearsals. In my role as director, I assisted members of the cast with details such as gestures, positioning on stage, timing of lines and the pauses between words and lines. Our performance was pretty near perfect by that time. We agreed to try a full dress rehearsal the following week. At the agreed time, we …

There are many different ways of rendering the information contained in the above two paragraphs. In this paper we draw attention to two phrases in the first version:

> 'we remained with...' in Kiswahili *tulichobakisha*…
> And
> 'when the time reached…' in Kiswahili *wakati ulipowadia*…

In each of these two phrases, English words have been used, but a speaker of Kiswahili can probably see that the meaning is not really related to the words 'remained' and 'reached' as they are idiomatically used in English. Our argument in this paper is that a reader may not understand the actual message, unless that reader has sufficient understanding of Kiswahili or other African languages to auto-translate, and understand the message as it appears in the second paragraph.

Here is another sample paragraph, taken from a paper dealing with a completely different topic:

> Self-determination is attributed with essential elements of the theory that humans are inherently proactive with their potential and mastering their inner forces (such as drives and emotions).

This is a classic example of a linguistically marginalised student stringing English words together without communicating a clear message, much like the character Lucky in Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. In the first instance we see that the verb 'attributed' does not usually take the

preposition 'with.' In the second instance it becomes clear that even if we were to change the preposition to the usual 'to,' the statement 'self-determination is attributed to essential elements of the theory that…' is still quite confusing. It would appear that this student has read somewhere of a theory that deals with the concept of self-determination. Unfortunately, the student does not succeed in explaining what he or she has understood to a monolingual hegemonic English speaker. In the words of Culler (117), this student is unable 'to make possible the production of meaning.'

Here is another illustration:

> … the stylistic approach will help in scrutinizing the relevant literary elements in the texts such as language structures, dialogue, flashback, illustration, foreshadowing, adventure, imagery, and story inside story, bildungsroman, mother-tongue. dialects and the underlying character traits the writer uses in order to check or validate intuitions by detailed analysis of …

This is the second paragraph of the specific assignment. I have not yet managed to decode the interlanguage of this message, even after thinking it over using the structures of the six languages known to me. Even if we assume that the full stop between the words 'mother-tongue' and 'dialects,' is a typing error and remove it, the phrase may still be misunderstood.

Below is another perplexing illustration:

> Chapman is of the opinion that stylistics deals with different dimensions in which a language can be used to meet relation in a certain discourse.

There are two problematic phrases in the above group of words. The first one concerns the noun 'dimension.' It may be possible to talk about the social dimensions of unemployment, for instance, but as far as language use is concerned the word 'dimension' as used above does not communicate effectively. The first group of words is followed by the second without pause, 'to meet relation in a certain discourse.' In the second group of words, the prepositional phrase 'meet relation in' is confusing. This whole excerpt (both groups of words together) is all the more marginalising for the student because the statement seems to be making reference to someone else's work (Chapman) but not presenting a direct quotation. It is not clear what the student intended to say or what he or she understood when reading.

A similar colonial impediment is discernible in the following excerpt:

> Dhawan observes that the entire attempt of the postcolonial feminist is to erase or dissolve 'subaltern space'. Sometimes, the postcolonial feminist finds herself at the crossroads between the responsibility or representation and 'permission to narrate', namely, license honour of being the voice of the 'victim' is the politics of her praxis.

Once more, it may not be clear to the monolingual colonial English speaking reader what the student is trying to say. It would seem that this student has come across work written by someone else (Dhawan) about feminist literary criticism in the postcolonial space. The student does not directly cite Dhawan and does not clearly communicate to the reader what the critic really intended to say.

In addition to the above lengthy illustrations of interference, below are some shorter ones where the problem is clearly related to use, or absence, of prepositions:

Example 1:
Phrase: She had not seen it again…
Possible meaning: She had never seen one before…

Example 2:
Phrase: Requirement needed for a traditional…
Possible meaning: Requirements for…

Example 3:
Phrase: Why they are preferred vis-à-vis…
Possible meaning: Why they are preferred over…

Example 4:
Phrase: Need is therefore found to contextualize literary texts to their cultural…
Possible meaning: There is a need, therefore, to contextualise literary texts.

Example 5:
Phrase: In South Africa cities were restricted to certain races
Possible meaning: In South Africa, there was racial segregation

Example 6:
Phrase: Narratives of the Indian experience center against tendencies of…
Possible meaning: … centre around the tendencies…

Example 7:
Phrase: This can be related with South Africa where…
Possible meaning: This can be compared to South Africa where…

Example 8:
Phrase: … we see conflicts arising from time to because the character feel they are different from the other.
Possible meaning: … sometimes we see differences in personality leading to conflicts between characters.

Example 9:
Phrase: It is such association to feminist ideas that warrant this research to use feminism approach.
Possible meaning: This association with feminist ideas calls for the feminist approach.

Example 10:
Phrase: The two writers use a lot of poetic licence and quite deviate from the traditions of verse.
Possible meaning: The two writers do not follow the usual conventions of writing poetry.

Example 11:
Phrase: Social inequalities are inscribed within a historical, political, social, cultural and economic context that influences as health and health care delivery
Possible meaning: Social inequalities are inscribed within

a historical, political, social, cultural and economic context in such a way as to influence health care delivery.

Example 12:
Phrase: The social construct for gender…
Possible meaning: The social construction of gender…

Example 13:
Phrase: Dedicates substantial effort in addressing diasporic issues
Possible meaning: Dedicates substantial effort to addressing diasporic issues

CONCLUSION

When students resort to thinking in the mother tongue but must write the message using hegemonic colonial English words as described in our illustrations above (taken randomly from actual take-away assignments and research papers), there are several obstacles for the writer and reader alike. In the first instance the language is not polished. In example 10 for instance, the student writes from the assumption that any deviation from the rules of language is poetic license, whereas 'poetic license' is used only where such deviation produces a special effect (https://owlcation.com/humanities/What-is-Poetic-License-Definition-and-Examples). Secondly, there is the risk of a misunderstanding if the reader is not familiar with the student's mother tongue. Thirdly, the student will score low marks on account of hegemonic, monolingual denaturalization of language usage in the attempt to give preference to hegemonic English even if the content is relevant. Worst of all, such students will eventually suffer great embarrassment if they have to make an international presentation or try to write a book for publication, a consequence of the persistent requirement to communicate in a postcolonial yet unnatural alien tongue.

Furthermore, though these variations are likely identifiable as systematic, they are emblematic of the inequalities faced by African students who have the concept of Western modernity foisted upon them in the post-colonial educational system. It is, therefore, not yet possible to overcome the marginalisation. The most workable solution may be to allow youth to use the language they are most comfortable with, when writing university assignments, as already suggested by Njoroge (2006) and Mbithi (2014), and have an active translation service. Indeed, Ngugi has persistently called for such an exchange (1995).

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