



**AN INVESTIGATION INTO LACK OF ADVERBIAL/
TENSE AGREEMENT IN THE SPOKEN ENGLISH OF
SELECTED UNDERGRADUATES**

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Abstract:

This study examines the lack of agreement between time adverbials and tenses in the spoken communication of selected undergraduates in Abuja. The study begins by looking at the rule-governed nature of the English language and how abiding by these rules enhances effective spoken and written communication. The study then briefly reviews literature bordering on key concepts in the topic. Thereafter, the paper discusses the methodology used in the collection of data from participatory and non-participatory observation aided by field notes comprising jottings of sentences of interest obtained from the spoken discourses of a cross-section of first-year students of three universities. Using the Error Analysis technique, the paper analyses the various sentences obtained from the subjects of the study by identifying and classifying the wrongly used adverbials and tenses along with their correct forms. The paper goes on to discuss the findings, which clearly establish a lack of agreement between the time expressed by the adverbials and tenses used in the sentences analysed. The findings also reveal that the present perfect tense, along with prepositional phrases functioning as adverbials, were the most erroneously used among the different tenses and various adverbials in the language. The paper concludes by emphasising the importance of these findings that do not only unravel the pattern of the errors common among the target group but also how this knowledge can help in pedagogy by bringing about targeted teaching aimed at addressing these problems and, by extension, enhancing proficiency and effectiveness in communication.

Keywords: grammar, concord/agreement, adverb, adverbial, tense

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1. Introduction

The English language like any other living language is rule governed. These rules which are meant to enhance not just effective but also well-organised communication in both the written and spoken forms, cut across all levels of language, such as phonetics and phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics and pragmatics. At the level of phonetics and phonology, these rules stipulate how words and other grammatical structures ought to be articulated or pronounced based on the sound system of the language. In contrast, at the level of syntax, these rules specify how individual words can be strung together to form larger grammatical structures and the analysis of the same. This assertion is corroborated by Kroeger (2005, p. 5), who posits that *“there are rules for the arrangement of words within a sentence, the arrangement of “meaningful elements” within a word.”* While Kroeger’s former submission operates in the realm of syntax, the latter operates at the level of morphology. At the level of morphology, these rules stipulate how new words ought to be formed in a language and the roles that specific units of meaning (inflectional morphemes) play in syntactic structures, among others. When it comes to semantics, these rules account for what words and their referents stand for while at the level of pragmatics, there are also rules which state how language ought to be used in specific situations or contexts. All living languages have the aforementioned rules which constitute their grammar. It is against this background that this paper seeks to investigate the flouting of some of these rules, particularly those of concord between time adverbials and tenses and the possible reasons behind these mistakes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 A Brief Definition of Grammar

The term grammar is generally defined as *“the complete set of rules needed to produce all the regular patterns in a given language”* (Kroeger, 2005, p. 2). Kroeger’s views are corroborated by Harmer (2015), who incorporates the need for knowledge on how to handle grammatical structures in his definition of grammar as *“a knowledge of what words can go where and what form these words should take”* (p. 22). In the words of Allerton (2005, p. 50), grammar deals with *“meaningful units of different sizes right up to the level of the sentence (and perhaps beyond).”*

Nelson (2001) defines grammar from a descriptive approach while focusing on its rules. Thus, the rules of grammar *“are the rules that we obey every time we speak, even if we are completely unaware of what they are”* (p. 2). Narrowing it down to the English language, he further adds that *“using Standard English involves making choices of grammar, vocabulary and spelling”* (p. 2).

Scrivener (2011) corroborates Nelson’s position by identifying four possible ways of defining grammar as follows:

- 1) rules about sentence formation, tenses, verb patterns, etc.
- 2) the moment-by-moment structuring of what we say as it is being spoken,

- 3) exercises (e.g., fill-in-the-gap) about tenses etc., and
- 4) our internal “database” as to what are possible or impossible sentences. He adds that while all four possible definitions are arguably valid descriptions of something “grammar-like”, their usefulness lies only in learners’ capacity to “transfer the studied knowledge into a living ability to use the language” (pp, 156-157)

Consequently, the knowledge an individual has of grammar would enable him or her to not only construct meaningful sentences that are grammatically correct but also identify those which negate these rules and are adjudged incorrect. These views are corroborated by Kreoger (2005), who explains that in describing the grammar of a language, “we are essentially trying to explain why speakers recognize certain forms as being “correct” but reject others as being “incorrect”...” (p. 2). He goes on to state that “speakers create sentences as needed... because they “know” the rules of the language. By using these rules, even a person who knew only a limited number of words could potentially produce an extremely large number of sentences.” (p. 5)

The expectation generally, as Kreoger (2005) puts it, is that “speakers create sentences as needed...”. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, especially among users of for instance, English, especially as a second language. Consequently, this paper seeks to examine how sentences are not “created as needed”, particularly with regard to agreement between the time expressed by adverbials of time and the tense of the verb among the subjects of this study.

2.2 The Different Ways of Expressing Time in the English Language

Every language has ways of talking about time. In most languages and particularly the English language, there are a variety of expressions that can be used to show when something happened or will happen. These may include temporal adverbs (soon, later, then), Prepositions (at, in, on, near, with, without) used with nouns in phrases providing information about time (at five o’clock, in the morning), Prepositional Phrases (in the morning, after the election), Noun Phrases (last year, that week, the next day), auxiliary verbs (will, has, did), tense among others (Kreoger, 2005, p. 146).

In line with Kreoger’s assertion, many scholars are of the opinion that indicating time must not be seen as the exclusive right of the verb alone, as other grammatical structures can also be used to indicate time. Among these scholars is Greenbaun (1996), who posits that “time is...conveyed with the help of adverbs (e.g. nowadays, tomorrow), prepositional phrases (e.g. in 1990, before the next meeting), noun phrases (e.g. last week, this evening), and clauses (e.g. when we saw them after the conflict is over)” (p. 254).

This segment of the paper examines these different grammatical structures used in expressing time, particularly those that relate to this work.

2.3 The Definition of Adverbs/Adverbials of Time and Their Use in Expressing Time

Before going ahead with the discussion on adverbs and adverbials of time, it is important to first talk briefly about adverbs and adverbials. According to Stockwell (1999), an adverb “describes the circumstances of an action: where it is done, when it is done or how it is

done" (p. 6). Gelderen (2002) opines that *"an adverb modifies a verb, adjective or adverb"* (p. 28). Similar views are expressed by Atkinson, Britain, Clahsen, Radford and Spencer (2005), who also maintain that an adverb is a word that *"typically modifies a verb, adjective or another adverb, indicating how, when or why something happened or the degree to which a property characterises an individual or event"* (p. 130).

In the same vein, Yule (2010) defines adverbs as *"words used, typically with verbs, to provide more information about actions, states and events.... Some adverbs... are also used with adjectives to modify information about things"* (p. 82). Similarly, Crystal (2008) sees an adverb as *"a term used in the grammatical classification of words to refer to a heterogeneous group of items whose most frequent function is to specify the mode of action of the verb"* (p. 14). Meyer corroborates Crystal's views by stating that adverbs, which serve as heads of adverb phrases, are a very heterogeneous form class (p. 128). Huddleston and Pullum (2002, p. 563) corroborate this assertion, stating that *"the adverb is a miscellaneous or residual category – the category to which words are assigned if they do not satisfy the more specific criteria for nouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions, and conjunctions."* Although Huddleston and Pullum (2002, p. 264) attempt to limit the number of items included in the class of adverbs, the class is still very large and diverse.

From the foregoing, it can be said that an adverb denotes a single word that is primarily used to provide additional information about the action expressed by the verb. Nelson (2001, p. 56) sums it up by stating that adverbs express three major types of meaning based on their categorisation thus:

- 1) Manner adverbs indicate how something happens.
- 2) Time adverbs indicate when something happened, as well as frequency of occurrence, and
- 3) Place adverbs indicate a place or a direction. Our concern in this study, however, is on the adverb of time.

While distinguishing the adverb from an adverbial, Crystal (2008) maintains that the term adverbial is widely used as *"a general term which subsumes all five categories based on functional equivalence namely: adverbs, adverb phrases, prepositional phrases, noun phrases, and adverb clauses"* (p. 14). He further states that within adverbials, many syntactic roles have been identified, of which verb modification has traditionally been seen as central. Similarly, Eastwood (2002) opines that *"an adverbial can be an adverb phrase, prepositional phrase, or noun phrase"* (p. 260).

With reference to adverbs and adverbials of time, Nelson (2001) posits that time adverbs are adverbs that *"indicate when something happened, as well as frequency of occurrence and time"* (p. 56). Similarly, Hewings (2002) opines that *"adverbs/adverbials of time indicate a definite point or a period in time or a definite frequency"* (p. 182). *"Adverbs of time ... when something happens, or when it is happening..."* (Swan, 2005, p. xix)

The discussion above proves that one of the ways by which time is expressed in the English language is by using adverbs or adverbials of time.

2.4 The Use of Tenses in Expressing Time

Apart from the use of adverbs and adverbials in expressing time, time, particularly with regard to the time of the action, a verb is expressed through tense. The tense of a verb indicates the time of its action. Tense as one of the characteristics of the verb has been defined in several ways by different scholars, among whom is Crystal (2008), who defines tense as *“a category used in the grammatical description of verbs (along with aspect and mood), referring primarily to the way the grammar marks the time at which the action denoted by the verb took place”* (p. 479).

In the same vein, Stockwell (1999) corroborates the views expressed by Crystal stating that tense *“is the grammatical category which relates to time”* (p. 294). Kreoger (2005) is of the opinion that *“tense marking indicates, to varying degrees of precision, the time when an event occurred, or a situation existed. In other words, it specifies the situation’s “location” in time... “*. He further states that *“the term tense is used only for time reference which is marked grammatically – that is, by purely grammatical elements such as affixes, auxiliaries, or particles”* (Kreoger, 2005, pp 146-147). Similarly, Michealis (2020), while citing Comrie (1985, p. 14), opines that *“tenses locate situations either at the same time as the present moment [...], or prior to the present moment, or subsequent to the present moment”* (Michealis, 2020, p. 164)

It can be seen from the discussion above that tense is another way of expressing time in the English language. A situation where the verb changes its form to indicate when its action took place.

2.5 Agreement/Concord

Every Standard English sentence is guided by rules stipulating how words should be strung together in a way that ensures harmony between and among them. These rules which create this harmony and consequently make a sentence grammatically correct, are referred to as concord or agreement. Concord or agreement, as Stockwell (1999, p. 10) defines it, *“is the grammatical phenomenon in which the form of one word in a sentence is determined by the form of another word which is grammatically linked to it”*. In the words of Crystal (2008, p. 98), concord is *“a term used in grammatical theory and description to refer to a formal relationship between elements, whereby a form of one word requires a corresponding form of another.”*

This relationship between elements within a sentence, going by Crystal’s definition, can be viewed in terms of:

- 1) Number as it relates to: (i) a subject and its verb, (ii) a pronoun and its antecedent.
- 2) Person as it involves: (i) pronoun and its antecedent, (ii) shifts from one person to another
- 3) Gender as it affects pronoun and its antecedent.
- 4) Tense as it relates to shifts from one tense to the other and as it agrees with other words that express time.
- 5) And voice, as it pertains to shifts from active to passive voice.

In more specific terms, Kreoger (2005) holds the view that agreement is *“a general term used to describe a situation in which the grammatical features of a noun or noun phrase*

determine the morphological shape of a word that is syntactically related to the noun or noun phrase in some way” (p. 111).

The features of the head noun which may be reflected in the agreeing dependent forms are gender, number, and case. Kreoger (2005), with reference to the verb, goes on to add that *“verb agreement refers to a system in which the form of the verb reflects the person, number, and/or gender of one or more arguments”* (p. 112). One key area left out by this definition is the fact that the verb must also agree with other words that express time, such as temporal adverbs and adverbials. Yule (2010), while talking about agreement in terms of tense, states that *“the form of the verb must be described in terms of another category called tense”* (p. 83).

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that agreement between and among words in a sentence is a necessary requirement that must be borne in mind when words are being selected and strung together to form such sentences. Unfortunately, just like this study seeks to find out, there is an absence of this harmony, particularly between tense and adverbials in the speech of the population of the study hence the need to further investigate.

3. Theoretical Framework: Error Analysis

The framework adopted for the analysis of the data for this study is error analysis. According to Erdogan (2005), error analysis deals with *“the learners’ performance in terms of the cognitive processes they make use of, recognizing or coding the input they receive from the target language”* (p. 263). Erdogan’s views are corroborated by Bussman (2006), who also defines error analysis as *“the linguistic approach which studies the types and causes of linguistic error which sometimes includes the evaluation and correction of errors”* (p. 378). He further opines that the level of error (norm error vs system error), the degree of communication breakdown, and the tendency towards fossilization play an equally significant role. In the same vein, Crystal (2008) defines error analysis as *“a technique for identifying, classifying, and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language, using any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics”* (p. 173).

According to Richards (1984), Error Analysis deals with *“the differences between the way people learning a language speak and the way adult native speakers of the language use the language”* (p. 1). Brown (2000, p166) sees *“error analysis as the process to observe, analyse and classify the deviation of the rules of the second language and then to reveal the systems operated by the learner.”*

Drawing from the discussion above, Brown believes that *“one of the fundamental focuses of error analysis is on the evidence that learners’ errors provide an understanding of the underlying process of second language acquisition.”* He goes on to add that error analysis emphasizes *“the significance of errors in learners’ interlanguage system”* (Brown 2000, p. 204). From the foregoing, it can be concluded that error analysis aims at obtaining information on the nature of the challenges faced by learners through identifying, classifying, and describing these challenges that manifest largely in the form of errors.

4. Methodology

The data for this study was obtained from both participatory and non-participatory observation aided by field notes. These notes were taken during spoken discourses of a cross-section of first-year students offering the mandatory English language course while interacting with them during lectures and at other forums. This data is presented and analysed in the next segment.

5. Data Presentation and Analysis

The data presented here for analysis comprises original sentences obtained from spoken communication of the subjects of this study. To enhance clarity, each sentence is presented in its original form and tagged. The sentences are also asterisked to indicate their grammatical incorrectness. Coming on the heels of each sentence is the analysis, which identifies the areas of discord with further explanations provided within the boundaries of the error analysis framework.

5.1 Sentence 1: *"I am on campus early in the morning."*

5.1.1 Analysis of Sentence 1

The sentence above shows a lack of concord between the time expressed by the simple present tense indicated by the verb *"am"* and that expressed by the adverbial phrase *"early in the morning"*. The disparity captured by the present and the past time expressed by the tense and the time adverbial, respectively, has negated what Crystal (2008, p. 98) says in his definition of concord that *"...it is a formal relationship between elements, whereby a form of one word requires a corresponding form of another."* Consequent upon the above, a lack of concord with regards to time has been created between the two grammatical structures thus rendering the sentence erroneous grammatically. To maintain the agreement in this sentence, *"am"* ought to have taken a corresponding adverbial like *"now"*, or *"at the moment"*, among others, which express the present time and thus agree with the tense expressed by the verb *"am"*.

5.2 Sentence 2: *"Before yesterday, the issue has been on the front burner."*

5.2.1 Analysis of Sentence 2

The time adverbial phrase *"before yesterday"* signifies that the stated action had taken place prior to the stated time. The use of the present perfect tense *"has been"* instead of *"had been"* creates a lack of agreement between the adverbial and the tense because the tense as used in the sentence shows that the issue which was brought to the front burner before the stated time in the past continued up to the present. Unfortunately, this is not the impression being put across. Thus, the relationship between the adverbial and the tense lacks concord with regard to the time expressed by the adverbial and that captured by the tense. The correct form ought to have been: *"Before yesterday, the issue had been on the front burner."* Or better still, a substitution of the adverb *"before"* with *since* thus: *"Since*

yesterday, the issue has been on the front burner." This way, "since "which" indicates a starting point of the action, agrees with the present perfect tense "has been". This corrected version rightly shows that the action began at a particular time and has continued up to the present.

5.3 Sentence 3: "We have informed them yesterday."

5.3.1 Analysis of Sentence 3

Like the two sentences analysed above, sentence 3 is another example of a lack of agreement between the tense and the adverb of time. The adverb "yesterday" expresses time that has passed already hence, the action, too, ought to have that which took place at a particular period in the past, thus expressed by the simple past tense. However, the use of the present perfect tense makes it appear like the action of "informing them" just took place, but then, the use of the adverbial "yesterday" contradicts what the verb has expressed. The correct form ought to have been: We informed them yesterday. This way, both the tense and the adverb would have expressed the same time, hence in agreement.

5.4 Sentence 4: "I have missed your test last week."

5.4.1 Analysis of Sentence 4

The time adverbial "last week" which is very much connected to the verbal element "have missed," expresses a definite time in the past and thus does not agree with the present perfect tense "have missed", which expresses a past action that has present consequences hence cannot be used with a specific time frame like "last week". The correct form ought to have been: "I missed your test last week" or simply put: "I missed your test" without the inclusion of the adverbial.

5.5 Sentence 5: "Recently, the school has approved it."

5.5.1 Analysis of Sentence 5

The adverb "recently", which denotes a short while ago cannot be used with a tense that indicates that the action took place at a particular period in the past. Consequently, if concord Stockwell (10) states, "is the grammatical phenomenon in which the form of one word in a sentence is determined by the form of another word which is grammatically linked to it" then the adverb "recently" would have stipulated that the tense expressed by the verb should be the simple past tense "approved" and not the present perfect tense "has approved" since the action took place at a specific time in the recent past.

5.6 Sentence 6: "I am just listening to a student yesterday."

5.6.1 Analysis of Sentence 6

The choice of the two adverbs "just" and "yesterday" within the context of use already creates a discord in the time they denote. While "just" captures immediacy, "yesterday" does not. When this is juxtaposed with the progressive action portrayed by the present continuous tense "am listening", the discord among the grammatical structures of time becomes even more pronounced. If one element determines the choice of subsequent

ones, like Crystal puts it above, then “*yesterday*” and “*just*” cannot be used together in this context the same way “*am listening*” cannot also be used with both adverbs. The right expression ought to have been, “*I was listening to a student yesterday...*”

5.7 Sentence 7: “*The hall has been closed by 2 pm.*”

5.7.1 Analysis of Sentence 7

The error identified in sentence 7 is a lack of concord between the present perfect tense “*has been closed*” and the prepositional phrase functioning as an adverbial modifying the verb. The present perfect tense cannot be used with a specific time like “*by 2 pm*”. There was even no need for the use of the adverbial in this instance except if the verb had been changed to ‘was’, thereby making the sentence read: “*The hall was closed by 2 pm.*”

5.8 Sentence 8: “*I miss your test on Wednesday.*”

5.8.1 Analysis of Sentence 8

In sentence 8, the simple present tense indicated by the verb “*miss*” obviously disagrees with the time expressed by the time adverbial conveyed by the prepositional phrase “*on Wednesday.*” Prepositional phrases, as Crystal (2008, p. 14) puts it, are subsumed under the general term adverbials. From the foregoing, if concord dictates that “*the form of one word in a sentence is determined by the form of another word which is grammatically linked to it*” (Stockwell, 1999, p. 10), then the verb “*miss*” in this context which expresses the present time does not indicate that as the adverbial expresses a past time that is at variance with the time expressed by the verb. To achieve concord, the correct form ought to have been “*I missed your test on Wednesday.*”

6. Discussion of Findings

From the data analysed above, it has been established that there is indeed a lack of grammatical concord between the tenses and adverbials used in expressing time within the same sentence.

The findings also reveal that the tense type that was most erroneously used was the present perfect tense, shown in sentences 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7, making a total of five such uses out of a total number of eight sentences. This is followed by the simple present tense, as shown in sentences 1 and 8, while the least erroneously used tense was the present continuous tense indicated by sentence 6.

In terms of adverbials, those most erroneously used were prepositional phrases and temporal adverbs, as shown in sentences 4, 7, 8 and 3, 5, and 6, respectively. Only two adverbial phrases were used, as shown in sentences 1 and 2.

The findings of this study also show that, apart from the wrong use of tenses and adverbials, the stringing together of other words to form sentences by the target group is devoid of other grammatical errors. This no doubt reveals the pattern of errors committed by the subjects of the study.

7. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that learners of the English language in general, and particularly the subjects of this study who are just beginning their journey in higher education, would typically exhibit some inadequacies in their command of the English language. These inadequacies that they encounter, according to Brown (2000, p. 204), “*provide an understanding to the underlying process of second language acquisition*”, which in this case reveals that the learners have difficulties in matching the time expressed tense of the verb and that expressed by the adverbial within a sentence. While these errors were pointed out by the lecturer concerned and treated on the spot, it is hoped that this information will be of importance to pedagogy as it has revealed and drawn attention to the challenges that learners in general and particularly the subjects of this study face on their way to attaining proficiency in the English language. It is hoped that revelations like these would make teaching more target-oriented so that these problems can be addressed frontally.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

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1. Martha Nguemo Terna-Abah. “Trendy versus Appropriate Language Use: The Position of Standard English in Formal Written and Spoken Communication among Undergraduates of Selected Universities in Abuja.” *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies*. 8.2 (2021) 108-117. <https://doi.org/10.23918/ijsses.v8i2p108>
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