Tense & Aspect in English & Yoruba: Problem Areas of Yoruba Learners of English

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The correct application of tense and aspect in English is a major challenge to the Yorùbá learner of English. Usually, mother tongue influence as well as the complexity of tense and aspect in English affects learners’ performance. This paper examines the differences between the two languages, explores the complexity of tense/aspect system in English and Yorùbá, and identifies areas of necessary emphasis as a basis for the preparation of a pedagogical grammar of English in a second language situation.

Keywords: tense and aspect, mother tongue, second language learners, pedagogical grammar

Introduction

Given the relative importance of the English language as a national and international language, its acquisition as a second or foreign language becomes imperative for speakers of other tongues. The acquisition is particularly germane when we observe that the English language in Nigeria has had many applications to social life. It is used not only as an official language, but also as a lingua franca which links the multivariate ethnic groups together. And as Bamgbose (1971:39) notes,

[T]hose who do not know English are at a disadvantage, for at onetime or the other they are inevitably involved with matters which require some knowledge of English: for example, with things like licences, electricity bills,… various government forms and official letters.

Our focus in this paper is the Yorùbá learner of English. It is observed that despite their years of tutelage in English language at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education, Yorùbá learners of English often feature inappropriate tenses on verbs in their use of the English language. Such errors, which might be due to mother tongue (MT) interference, hypercorrection, generalisation of newly acquired knowledge etc., are also extended to aspect, since tense and aspect often co-occur in sentences.

Lamidi (2004) has discussed tense as an aspect of agreement relations in English and Yoruba. He observes that learners may find the use of tense problematic in certain contexts such as when the verb occurs as the only verbal element in a simple sentence or when it occurs in an embedded clause (p. 47). The learner’s problem is attributed to the non-inflectional nature of Yorùbá verbs, the knowledge of which impedes learner’s performance in the English language. Since its scope is primarily on agreement relations, however, it does not treat in-depth different occurrences of tense features; while a discussion of aspect is totally absent. It becomes necessary then, to study the tense and aspect together. Hence, this study focuses on this area with a view to pointing out areas of differences and similarities for pedagogical uses. In what follows, we discuss the theoretical framework, tense and aspect and their occurrences in English and Yorùbá languages, and finally the conclusion.
Contrastive Analysis (CA)

One major feature of CA that accounts for its continued relevance is its use for pedagogical purposes. CA compares two languages with the sole aim of finding similarities and differences. It is assumed that in situations of language contact, learners’ mother tongue will interfere in their performances in a target language, in this respect English (Weinreich 1953); thus leading to nativization and variety differentiations in English (Adetugbo 1979, Bamgbose 1995, Banjo 1996, Udofot 2004) It is also argued, following the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, that areas of similarities will facilitate learning while areas of differences will inhibit learning in a second language situation (Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991), James (1980). In other words MT features might be transferred into learners’ English language usage, either positively or negatively.

According to James (1980), transfer and interference are two sides of a coin. Transfer refers to positive influence of first language or system (S₁) on second language/system (S₂) such that the S₂ is unaffected and the learner finds it easy to acquire the target language. Conversely, interference refers to negative influence which is a product of features of S₂ transferred into S₁. This often occurs as a result of inappropriate S₁ rule application on S₂ structures. Within transfer theory, the assumption is that learners unconsciously transfer the features of S₁ to S₂ during S₂ acquisition and this can occur at the level of phonology, grammar and lexis. In this paper, we are concerned with both features but the negative transfer or interference will be emphasized for its pedagogical implications.

Tense

Tense can be described as time specification in a sentence. Such specification, which often reflects on the verb, indicates whether the action is immediate, on-going, or completed. According to Comrie (1976:2), tense relates to the time an event occurred to the moment of speaking; i.e., tense is defined in relation to the time of speaking. Scholars of English grammar have tried to pin down tense reference to specifics. While some consider grammatical tense to have three parts: present, past, and future (Comrie, 1976); others maintain that there are only two: present and past (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1979).

In Yorùbá language too, Odunuga (1982:264) has highlighted the confusion generated among scholars on the number of tenses in Yorùbá: “Different linguists have attributed different number of tenses in Yorùbá oscillating between three, five and even thirty”. If scholars are confused about the nature of tense (and aspect), how does a learner with Yorùbá background cope with another language which has some complexity of tense? In a more recent publication, however, Bamgbose (1990:167) argues that there are two tenses in Yorùbá: àṣikò ọjọ ńwàjú and àṣikò afunánmọ́ní (the future and the past/present). For the purposes of this paper, only the present and the past tenses are relevant and these we shall pursue further (since both English and Yorùbá languages have distinct future markers).

Verbs are often inflected for tense (as well as number, person and case) in English, but this is not so in Yorùbá. This disparity is a major cause of error in learners’ English usage. Thus, learners may violate some rules of English grammar such as those on tense sequence, correct realization of irregular verb forms,
tense/aspect forms in reported speech and the appropriate choice of the present or past tense in particular contexts.

**Present and Past Tenses**

Structurally, the present tense in English is usually marked by inflections such as –s, -es, -ies, and the null (ø) morpheme, while the past is often marked by –ed, a replacement of the internal sound of the verb, and ø morpheme, as in the following examples:

i. Present
1a. John **plays** soccer.(-s)
   b. The sun **rises** from the East.(-es)
   c. Tade **carries** a bag.(-ies)
   d. Now, we **cut** the rope.(ø)
   e. I **write** good stories.(ø)
   f. You **like** maths.(ø)

ii. Past
2a. John **played** soccer.(-ed)
   b. The sun **rose** from the East.(vowel sound replacement)
   c. Titi **carried** a bag.(-ied)
   d. Yesterday, we **cut** the rope.( ø)
   e. I **wrote** good stories.(vowel sound replacement)
   f. You **liked** maths. (-ed)

As these examples show, the verbs have distinct forms for representing present and past tenses. This is not so with Yorùbá where the verbs do not change their forms when they are used in both the present and the past tenses. The following Yorùbá sentences are either in the past or in the present tense forms. However, the context of occurrence determines the intended interpretations.

3a. Olú gbé àwo. ‘Olu carries/carried a plate.’
   Olu carry plate

b. Adé rí ejò, ó sá. ‘Ade sees/saw a snake, he flees/fled.’
   Ade see snake 3sg run

c. Bisi fa Tolú. ‘Bisi pulls/pulled Tolu.’
   Bisi pull Tolu

d. Taye jókó, o (ń) serè. ‘Taye sits/sat down and plays/played.’
   Taye sit 3sg (cont) play

Generally, the present tense form is used in English for different situations such as universal truths, habitual actions, fixed/scheduled programmes, etc., but these are not true for Yorùbá. For instance, while the English present tense can mark habitual actions, as in:
4. Joy goes to church every day.

The future marker máa and the continuous aspect marker ñ indicate habitual actions in Yorùbá, as in:

5. Jeje máa ñ sùn sáá ni. ‘Jeje always sleeps.’
   Jeje Hab cont sleep always be

6. Dada ñ  gbé ilé e wa. ‘Dada lives in our house.’
   Dada cont live house of us

Thus when sentences such as the following are uttered by the learner, the intended interpretation may be the future tense rather than the progressive tense:

7. I am killing the fowl immediately after this conversation. (Rather than *I am going to kill…*)

8. You aren’t going there on empty stomach; you are eating before you go. (Rather than *you are going to eat…*/you must eat…)

This use of the progressive form to mark future is very close to the British English form of be going to which also marks future as indicated in the brackets (7 & 8).

English language also draws a distinction between the third person singular and other persons as shown in the examples under (1) above. However, this distinction does not obtain in Yorùbá. Although Yorùbá distinguishes person/number features, its verbs do not change their forms for purposes of agreement, in similar situations. (This is shown in the uninflected forms of the verbs in (3)). Lamidi (2004) has observed that this is a major source of error by Yorùbá learners of English. Hence, learners may produce sentences which lack subject-verb concord, as in the following:

10. *One of the boys who has passed the exam was excited.

Our observation above also affects timeless truths such as The sun rises from the east; John writes with a black pen; and ideas presented in historic present such as: He walks into the room and sits on the couch. While the first two expressions are habitual actions and may be promptly rendered with the use of the habitual past used to, the last example is conceptually in the past and is often so rendered by the learner. Thus, while maintaining the same meaning, the learner may reproduce the sentences, as in:

11a. John used to write with a black pen.
    b. He walked into the room and sat on the couch.

Although sentence (11b) is also appropriate, the learner may not be able to interpret the present tense form of the structure as that which has continued relevance or that which is spontaneous speech. In the same vein, scholars are sometimes undecided as to whether to use the historic present or the past in citing scholarly works. Thus, when a form is selected ab initio the other is used elsewhere, e.g., Banjo (1996) has argued that…. However, Bamgbose (2000) disagreed totally with….
are acceptable, learners often get carried away by their writings that they mix the two forms, which is wrong. This, then, is also a source of problems to users of English as a second language.

If the foregoing is problematic, the use of the English present tense to indicate future events might be avoided altogether by learners. There are two reasons for this. First, English has modal auxiliaries such as shall and will, which can be used to mark future. This same feature is marked in Yorùbá by á, máa and yóò (Bamgbose, 1990:170). Second, Yorùbá verbs are not inflected for tense, whether past or present (Odunuga 1982, Bamgbose 1990). Thus, it is plausible to argue that learners may prefer to use forms that are closer to what obtains in the mother tongue rather than those that are foreign and even require some tasks. The Yorùbá learner may therefore have problems with using the present tense form of a verb to realise future meaning.

Neutralisation of Tense
In English, the first verbal element bears the tense just as in Yorùbá, but in the latter this is not morphologically distinguished. In Yorùbá Serial Verb Constructions for instance, examples like the following occur:

12a. Adé  fẹ  lọ  ra  epo.
Adé want go buy fuel
‘Adé wants to go and buy fuel.’

b. Olú  fí  owó  ra  gúgúrú  jẹ.
Olú use money buy popcorn eat
‘Olu spent money on popcorn for consumption.’

c. Wálé  jẹ  gbèsè  ra  ewúrẹ  pa  tà.
Wálé incur debts buy goat kill sale
‘Wálé incurred debts to buy and kill a goat for sale.’

13a. Mo ti  fẹ  lọ  ra  epo
I  ASP want go buy fuel
‘I am ready to go and buy fuel/ I had wanted to go and buy fuel.’

b. Adé  yóò  fí  owó  ra  gúgúrú  jẹ
Adé FUT use money buy popcorn eat
‘Adé will spend money on popcorn for consumption.’

c. Wálé  maa  jẹ  gbèsè  ra  ewúrẹ  pa  tà
Wálé FUT incur debt buy goat kill sale.
‘Wálé will incur debts to buy and kill a goat for sale.’

Despite the temporal distinctions in (12) and (13), there are no morphological inflections for tense in the Yorùbá examples.

Furthermore, in English, verbs or verb phrases can be conjoined. However, depending on the structure, a verb in a conjoined structure may have neutral or independent tense realisations. The first verb or auxiliary item in such structures usually indicates the tense and therefore has independent tense whereas other conjoined verbs have neutral tense, e.g.:
14a. Òjó plans to sow the seed.
   \[+\text{TNS} \quad -\text{TNS}\]

b. Adé should go and bring the article.
   \[+\text{TNS} \quad -\text{TNS} \quad -\text{TNS}\]

c. Ade shot at the lion, wounded it, and ran home.
   \[+\text{TNS} \quad +\text{TNS} \quad +\text{TNS}\]

The verbs marked +TNS in (14) have independent tense, whereas those with -TNS have neutral tense (since they are not specified for present or past tenses). Just as in (14a&b), the verbs in (12&13) are in a sequence and only the first verb carries the tense while the other verbs remain neutral. In the Yorùbá examples, the first verb bears the tense (following Collins, 1997). For convenience, we may call this abstract tense since it is not morphologically realised and this is spread over other verbs. It does not really matter whether the first verbal item is a verb (12a-c) or an aspectual marker (13a-c), it bears tense which spreads over and neutralises the tense of the other verb.

The same situation obtains in the English examples where the first verbal item plans in (14a) and should in (14b) bear the tense in their respective sentences and the other verbs maintain their base forms. The only difference, however, is that tense is morphologically realised as present in (14a) and as past in (14b). In (14c), however, each verb bears its own tense. This is simply because (14c) is a compound sentence. It contains three clauses which all have identical subjects, but the last two subjects were deleted to avoid redundancy. Hence, the verbs remain tensed because each is the main verb and head of its clause.

Contrary to the situation in English, Yorùbá does not usually conjoin verb phrases. Rather, simple clauses may be conjoined to form compound sentences as in

15a. Òjó ra oko, ó gbin ighi éléso, ó sì pa áti!
   Ojo buy farm he plant tree fruit he then abandon it
   ‘Òjó bought a farm, (he) planted tree crops and (he) abandoned it!’

However, there is another possible reading of the sentence in (12c). In this sense, each verb serves as the head of a clause whose subject and/or object has been deleted because it is identical/ has the same referent with the subject and/or object of the first (matrix) clause. Here is an expansion of the sentence:

15b. Wálé je gbèsè, Wálé ra ewúrẹ, Wálé pa ewúrẹ,
    Wálé incur debt, Wálé buy goat, Wálé kill goat,
    Wálé ta ewúrẹ.
    Wálé sell goat
    ‘Wálé incurred debt to buy and kill a goat for sale.’

In this sentence, the clauses are ordered in a temporal sequence of the occurrence of the events. Given the redundancy in (15b), the sentence can only be used for emphasis. Hence (12c) is preferable in standard Yorùbá usage. But then, each of the verbs will have its own independent tense just as they occur in (13c). In essence, learners of English may not have problems in using tenses in compound sentences.
Tense Sequence
Regardless of our observations in the last paragraph, the learner may have problems with the sequence of tenses in English. In English, verbs in sentences which contain more than one clause should agree in tense such that when the first clause begins with the present tense, the next/other clauses will be in the present; and when the first clause begins with the past tense form, the other verbs follow suit (Odejide, et al., 1999). This would have been relatively easy for the Yorùbá learner in whose mother tongue the verbs are interpreted as either present or past according to the context. However, the exceptions to the rule in English, that the tenses on the verbs may differ if certain conditions subsist, may be confusing to the learner. Such exceptions as in reported speech, where the report is still relevant and the statement has past reference, often confuse learners. Thus, the learner may mix up the tenses in such situations. Consider the following:

16. *Did you balloted?
17. *I knew that he will go.
18. Aristotle said that nothing can/could harm a good man.

While the first sentence shows an error that emanates from ordinary tense marking on verbs, the second sentence contains an error on tense sequence. The third, however, is correct, whichever option of the second verb is used. Nevertheless, because this sentence is in reported speech, the Yorùbá learner of English is certain to choose could rather than can as the second verb in (18). Thus, we may say that the inconsistency in the application of the rule of tense sequence is a possible problem area for the Yorùbá learner of English.

IV. Irregular Verbs
Furthermore, the learner may not be at home with some irregular verbs in English. Verbs such as burst, feed, bite, cut, spread, and read, may cause problems such that the learner wonders what form to use for the past tense. The most immediate solution that is available to the learner is to generalise and use the –ed form in the context of the past tense. Therefore, learners may and often produce sentences such as the following:

   b. *The president broadcasted to the nation last night.

In addition, the learner may be confused by such verbs that have two different realisations of the past. Such verbs include spell (spelt/spelled) and spill (spilt/spilled). Further, words such as lie and fall have past tenses that are similar to the base forms of other words: lay and fell. This causes further confusion to learners. The situation is worsened by the learner’s possible exposure to the American variety of English which permits some unconventional spelling forms, as in:

20a. The man traveled to Lagos.
   b. She cancelled the trip to Japan
Sometimes, however, when the learner is told that some of these forms do not change, he gets more confused when he comes across the words *costed* and *broadcasted* in some contexts.

20b. He **costed** the materials for the building.
20c. He **broadcasted** the grains.

Yet, he must know that these are peculiar to the registers of banking/finance and of agriculture respectively. The major solution is to group these verbs into their separate categories and learn each (old, modified or new) word with its distinguishing features.

**Aspect**

Aspect refers to the different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation (Comrie, 1976:3). Aspect markers in English are principally the perfective and the progressive forms. The respective aspect markers in Yorùbá are *ti* and *ń*. As stated above, the markers can be present or past, but these features are not morphologically marked unlike what obtains in English. Consider:

21a. A **ti** dé kí Olú tó sùn .
   We ASP arrive before Olú – sleep
   ‘We had arrived before Olú slept.’

   b. A **ti** lọ a sì **ti** bọ.
   We ASP go we and ASP return
   ‘We have gone and returned.’

   c. A **ti** gbọ pé ó **ti** dé.
   We ASP hear that s/he ASP return
   ‘We have heard that s/he has arrived.’

In (21a) *ti* is past, but in the other sentences (21b&c) *ti* is present. Despite this distinction, however, *ti* remains invariant.

Consider also the possibility of ambiguity in the perfective aspect in Yorùbá.

22a. Mo ti jí.
   ‘I have /had woken up.’

   b. Adé ti dé.
   ‘Ade has/had arrived.’

Due to tense and agreement distinctions, the translations above are two, which shows that each of the expressions is ambiguous. Given the foregoing situations, the learner may also mix up the tenses on perfective aspects. Since the aspectual form of Yorùbá is invariant between the two interpretations, the learner may not know which of the English forms (present/past, singular/plural) to use. It follows then that this is capable of causing learning problems to learners.
The realisation of the progressive aspect in certain expressions may also cause multiple interpretations.

23a. Olú jó. (i) ‘Olú dances.’
    (ii) ‘Olú is/was dancing.’
    (iii) ‘Olú does dance.’

b. Adé bò. (i) ‘Ade shall come.’
    (ii) ‘Ade is/was coming.’

c. Òjó jẹun. (i) ‘Ojo eats.’
    (ii) ‘Ade is/was coming.’
    (iii) ‘Ade really eats.’

d. Mo lọ. (i) ‘(Now) I go.’
    (ii) ‘I often go.’
    (iii) ‘I am going.’

e. Mo máa lọ. (i) ‘I often go.’
    (ii) ‘I used to go.’

The different interpretations in each Yorùbá sentence underscore the different possible interpretations in the learner’s mind when he or she wants to express his/her Yorùbá ideas in English language. The ambiguity inherent in the Yorùbá aspect markers may lead to a confusion in which learners use just any form for the present tense in English. Since it is possible that learners’ mother tongue influences their performance, the possibility also obtains that this performance will include any of the foregoing interpretations which occur in different contexts. Notice that in Yorùbá sentences all the interpretations are acceptable in appropriate contexts.

Perhaps more problematic is the use of used to for habitual actions rather than past habitual actions. Really, in pronunciation, the other version: use to is more common, which ‘physically’ makes it ‘present’. Perhaps too, this can also be seen as a feature of Nigerian English.

**Conclusion**

Having looked at the disparities of tense and aspect between English and Yorùbá languages, we realise that the Yorùbá learner faces some problems which s/he has to overcome in the learning of English. The first problem is the disparity in tense realisation in the two languages. Since tense is not morphologically realised in Yorùbá, the learner has to master the types of tenses in English language, their morphological shapes and their appropriate contexts of use. In addition, the emphasis on grammatical features of English without a corresponding emphasis on meaning may also cause some learning problems, for learners may learn things mechanically or memorise rules relating to tense placement in sentences. This encourages learners to acquire the rules without sound knowledge of the semantic basis of expressions.
Second, the mother tongue is a major obstacle to learners’ acquisition of the strange and complex features of English tense/aspect. Learners must not allow the mother tongue to influence their performance; rather, they should acquire the general rules for tense and aspect placements in their appropriate contexts as well as exceptions to such rules in English. In essence, learners should not generalise rules which allows S₂ features to interfere with S₂ forms. Teachers and scholars of English as a second language, therefore, need to emphasise these areas of language in their teaching and in books on the subject.

References


