

Interlanguage Fossilization: Description and Analysis of Fossilized Grammatical Items in the English Language of Secondary School Learners in Nakuru County, Kenya

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Abstract

Interlanguage fossilization is a universal phenomenon that commonly occurs among adult language learners. Secondary school learners complete secondary school level having not mastered the grammar of the English language as revealed by errors in their language performance. Grammar is the core element of language because other elements of the language relate to each other through it. It is also the most descriptive area of language comprising the structures, rules, systems and subsystems which combine to form utterances that effectively communicate ideas, facts and messages. The descriptive nature of grammar makes it complex and prone to fossilization in many aspects especially in the areas of the rules and subsystems. The performance of English language in Kenyan schools seems to be weak, particularly in the area of grammar, as indicated by the KNEC performance results and performance studies that have been carried out. One possible explanation of such performance could be that there is interlanguage fossilization. It had not been established through research whether there was fossilization. This study filled that gap. The objectives of this study were to identify and describe the grammatical items indicative of fossilization in the learners' language, and analysed them to establish whether there is fossilization of grammar, and finally establish the areas of grammar that have fossilized. The interlanguage theory provided the theoretical underpinnings of the study. The study used students from some selected secondary schools in Nakuru County in the period between 2018-2020. Learners' language was analysed using classroom written tests on selected grammatical areas that manifested the use of the various grammatical items that fossilize which include grammatical structures, systems, subsystems and rules. The findings were that there is fossilization in some areas of grammar. These findings can be used by curriculum planners and educators to formulate intervention strategies and remedial measures to facilitate progress in the development of the learners' interlanguage until they achieve competence in the English grammar.

Keywords: English, fossilization, grammatical items, interlanguage, learners

Introduction

This paper examines the secondary school learners' interlanguage so as to establish whether the poor performance in English language recorded over a period of time was as a result of fossilization. According to the Kenyan English language syllabus, secondary school students should be able to use English language correctly and appropriately in all its aspects by the time they complete secondary school level since they are taught English from primary school. It is expected that by this time, they should achieve competence in the areas of vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling, word meaning, grammar and writing as spelt out in the four broad language areas or skills (Brown, 2014). The four language skills include speaking, listening,

writing and reading. Grammar is also one of the broad areas of skills to be covered as spelt out in the syllabus.

An examination of some studies carried out earlier on the performance of grammar indicated that the area was poorly performed in most of the schools as well as at various levels of education in the country. Grammar as a component of language is a core area and affects the other areas of the language skills directly. It is complex in nature and is considered to be difficult by most learners thus bringing fossilization in some aspects of grammar. The English definite article for example, can be fossilized as it is considered a difficult feature of the English language for L2 learners to acquire, particularly for L1 speakers of article-less languages (Crosthwaite, 2016). According to Cook (1991), the other areas of language relate to each other through grammar. For example, grammar affects or is affected by word formation, pronunciation (through stress), spelling and meaning, and other relations such as those expressed through functional words. Grammar also affects the sentence which is the key element of communication that enables learners to express themselves in spoken and written language as they combine words into phrases, clauses, and sentences.

To examine whether the poor performance in English was as a result of fossilization, the component of grammar was selected. This study therefore examined grammatical fossilization by analysing morphological and syntactical errors indicative of fossilization because these two components are the main ones that constitute the grammar of a language.

Literature Review

The notion of interlanguage comprises the fact that in the process of learning a language, learners develop a linguistic system that is self-contained and different from both the learners' first language and the second one that they are learning. This learner-language has been referred to in different terms by various linguists. For example, Corder (1981) called it idiosyncratic dialect or transitional dialect while Selinker (1972) called it interlanguage. This means that the grammatical system is temporary and changes as the learners acquire concepts of the language they are learning. The interlanguage keeps evolving into an ever-close approximation of the target language as the learners make progress along the language continuum.

Interlanguage fossilization, therefore, is the notion that in the process of learning and acquiring the second language, the interlanguage may reach one or more temporary restricting phases when its development towards the target language becomes detained and ceases to progress. Since the interlanguage is a changing language system, if this cessation persists, never to change, then permanent fossilization occurs. If this cessation occurs in the areas of phonology, morphology, syntax, or semantic and pragmatic, then phonological, morphological, syntactical or pragmatic fossilization occurs. It was therefore important in this study to examine morphology and syntax since they are key components of the grammar of a language.

The grammatical items that fossilize are grammatical structures, rules, systems and subsystems (Selinker, 1972; Han & Tarone, 2014). The grammatical structures are composed of words, phrases, clauses and sentences, while the grammatical rules include the morphological rules that govern the formation of words and the syntactical rules that govern the formation of phrases, clauses and sentences. The rules also include morphosyntactic rules that allow words to inflect into various forms as they combine into larger structures. The inflectional rules are morphosyntactic because the rules of syntax determine when a word inflects or takes a certain form while the rules of morphology determine the form of the word.

The grammatical systems are variables constituted by a number of values. The English language grammatical systems are manifested through linguistic relations found between forms in clauses and phrases. According to Huddleston (1984; 1988), these linguistic relations fall into two fundamentally distinct types: syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations; that is, 'and' relations and 'or' relations. Syntactic functions of subject, predicator and object are established

to handle syntagmatic relations such as the ones holding between the phrases. Paradigmatic relations such as the ones on different forms of words involve variables like past and present forms, perfect and non-perfect forms, positive and negative forms and these also constitute the forms of one word or a lexeme. The English language grammatical systems, therefore, include tense, aspect, polarity, case, number, person, voice, evidentiality and reference classification.

These systems have variables; for instance, the tense system has the variables of present and past; aspect has perfective and non-perfective as well as the progressive; while polarity has positive and negative; case has nominative and accusative; number has plural and singular; person has 1st 2nd and 3rd persons; and voice has active and passive voices. Reference classification covers gender, noun class classifiers like possessiveness, and human and non-human or animate and inanimate, and definiteness (Clark, 2015; Dost & Bohloulzadeh, 2017). These systems operate in words and are enabled by the rules and the relations operating in the systems and subsystems of the language. The content words are used to refer to elements and function words to signal language internal relationships (Huddleston, 1984).

The grammatical subsystems are the syntactic and morphological properties that concern the internal structures of the forms and their functional potential that bring about the grammatical relations. Word forms are assigned to syntactic classes and subclasses on the basis of the various types of shared properties. These shared properties of the forms of syntactic classes and subclasses are of two main types. One concerns the internal structure of the forms and the other their functional potential (Huddleston, 1984). The English language grammatical subsystems include the process of altering words through inflections, derivations, transformations, ordering of words and the use of functional words as items of grammar to bring out relationships (Swan 2005; Arslan et al., 2021).

According to Huddleston (1988), the multidimensionality of paradigmatic relations among the clauses includes interrogative, declarative, negative, positive, passive, active and in if-cleft constructions. This dimension of clause contrast gives rise to the clause types which are declarative, imperative, interrogative and exclamative. These are terms in the system of clause types where a system is a set of mutually exclusive class contrasting grammaticality on a single dimension. We can therefore distinguish the clause types as the systems and the syntactic and thematic processes as the subsystems. The syntactic and thematic systems of the clause involve: addition of elements, omission of some that are understood, and re-arrangement of the elements through re-ordering and re-assignment of grammatical functions. They also include the selection of some elements of a special kind instead of some ordinary ones with the same functions in the unmarked (Radford, 2004). These syntactic processes described above are transformations. In clauses, a transformation is a syntactic process converting a more elementary construction into a less elementary one and it is a subsystem in the clause systems (Swan, 2005). These descriptions of the grammatical items that fossilize laid the foundation for analysing the language of the learners under study in Nakuru to establish whether there is fossilization.

Interlanguage Theory

The theoretical underpinnings for the study were derived from Selinker's interlanguage theory (1972), with consideration of the current expansions on the theory as collaborated by Saville, (2006) and Han and Tarone (2014). The interlanguage theory posits that learners construct a system of abstract linguistic rules based on observable output that results from their attempted production of the target language norms. In this study, the norms of English as spelt out in Standard English and as found in the learners' course books were used. Learners construct internal rules which they adjust from stage to stage forming a continuum. This makes the language-learner language (the interlanguage) to be a system of developing competence. The internal rules constructed by language learners come about as they test hypothesis about the

nature of the language they are learning, and in the process, they make errors by deviating from the norms of the target language (TL) rules as they hypothesis on the rules.

The language of the learners is, therefore, dynamic because it keeps on changing as the learners acquire new rules of the TL. This is done by revising the interim system to accommodate new hypothesis about the TL language system and consequently new rules get into the learners' system. This view of the learners' language being dynamic and rule based indicates that as long as the learners are learning, they can always improve on their language performance and acquisition. However, there are times when this developing language system becomes trapped and the rules being revised become encased in the learners' language also referred to as the interlanguage. This occurs where learning fails to continue due to various factors such as lack of motivation for learning as well as the other factors such as input filters that prevent the turning of input into intake and general individual factors such as aptitude, intelligence, ineffective feedback and inappropriate teaching and learning strategies among other factors.

Methodology

The study was conducted in five secondary schools in Nakuru County. Classroom written tests were used as tools for collecting data. Two tests were given; one in term two between May and June 2018 to the students while in form two, and the other to the same students in term two between May and June 2019 when in form three. There was a separating duration of approximately a year to find out whether the students indicated any improvement in their language or they made the same errors. The two written tests consisted of a cloze test and a composition. The cloze tests were administered to test the learners' performance of various areas of grammar that indicated the use of grammatical items according to the definition of fossilization adapted in this study; that is, grammatical items that fossilize are structures, rules and subsystems that become encased in the learners' interlanguage. Therefore, similar but not identical aspects of grammar that revealed the learners' interlanguage performance as they applied the grammatical rules, systems and subsystems, and grammatical structures were selected. The compositions were used because they revealed the learners' interlanguage since they allow simultaneous production of language by the learners while the cloze tests were used to test the learners' language performance in various areas of grammar while checking the avoidance strategy.

Data collected included the errors identified in the cloze tests and in the learners' compositions. Errors indicative of fossilization that manifested the grammatical items that fossilize comprising the grammatical structures, rules, systems and subsystems were identified and described using surface error taxonomy.

Discussion of Findings

The grammatical structures, rules, systems and subsystems that indicated fossilization were manifested through the repeated errors and errors that reappeared in the students' interlanguage as revealed by their language performance. The types of errors that manifested the grammatical items that fossilize in the study included tense and aspect errors, transformational errors, concord errors, double marking errors, and regularization errors. Errors on grammatical structures included errors on pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and determiners. In the next sub-sections, these errors were identified, described and analysed according to the grammatical items they manifested.

Grammatical Structures that Fossilize

As already mentioned in this paper, the errors that manifested grammatical structures were revealed through the use of articles, adjectives, adverbs, verbs and pronouns. Examples of such errors are seen in the sentences that follow:

- 1. We need a few money urgently.**
- 2. This happenings are characteristic of bad weather.**
- 3. Give a honest answer.**

The above errors made in the area of determiners indicated that the learners were not able to maintain number agreement in the use of determiners. In the first sentence, the adjectival determiner 'a few' is used with uncountable noun 'money'. In sentence two, the demonstrative 'this' should have been inflected into the plural form because 'happenings' is in plural while in sentence three, the indefinite article 'an' should have been used instead of 'a' since the adjective 'honest' begins with a vowel sound because 'h' is a silent sound. Other errors on grammatical structures included errors on pronouns and prepositions such as the following:

- 4. The kariuki's and them are enjoying the dinner**
- 5. The loud noise of the rain disturbed Mary and I**

In the above sentences the students selected the pronoun whose cases were wrong. The case of the pronoun in sentence 4 did not match with the noun it is conjoined to, while in sentence 5, the pronoun should have been in objective case. There were prepositional errors such as the following:

- 6. I called her at greet her**
- 7. We were all happy and clearly played to the field**

The learners would use the wrong prepositions, for instance, 'at' is used instead of 'to' (sentence 6), and sentence 7, 'to' is used inappropriately instead of 'in', to have the phrase as 'played in the field'.

There were errors also on the noun as a grammatical structure where the nouns would not be inflected correctly for number and possessiveness as indicated below giving rise to concord errors as in the next 2 examples:

- 8. Then the musical instrument were connected and officially the party began.**
- 9. My face had changed and became a man face**

In the above sentences, the plural 's' and the possessive 's' are omitted while 'became' is wrongly inflected.

The findings on grammatical structures were that the learners had no major problems in their use. The seriousness of the deviations and the number of errors in the tested grammatical structures did not indicate fossilization for the majority of the learners. However, these structures are syntactic units acted upon by the rules and subsystems as they fulfil their syntactic functions. They were, therefore, affected by the rules and subsystems that indicated fossilization, especially the inflection subsystem and the rules. For instance, the verb as a grammatical structure indicated fossilization in relation to the inflection subsystem. This could be explained by the fact that verbs are affected by the inflectional rules and subsystem more than any other structure.

Verbs have an elaborate inflectional paradigm as they inflect for tense and aspects, and number in the case of auxiliary verbs. Verbs and verb phrases are also affected by inflectional and transformational rules and subsystems as they express voice, polarity, and mood. Learners may fail to acquire these complicated relationships completely and fossilization then occurs. The noun as a grammatical structure indicated fossilization through failure of inflecting to maintain concordial relations.

Grammatical Rules, Systems and Subsystems that Fossilize

As already explained, grammatical rules not only affect the structure but also govern the applications of the systems and subsystems. That is why grammar is also defined as a set of rules that govern the use of language. Most of the repeated errors that indicated fossilization in this study had to do with the applications of rules; both morphological and syntactical rules as well as the morphosyntactic rules. These were flouted as learners used the structures and applied the subsystems. That is, the rules were broken as they formed verb phrases, inflected verbs for tense and aspects, turned positive statements into negative ones and active sentences into passive sentences, as well as statements into questions. Rules were also broken as the students added question tags and turned direct statements into reported speech. The errors manifesting fossilized grammatical rules and subsystems comprised the greatest percentage (77.5%) of the errors. A majority of the students involved in the study made errors in these areas of grammar. Sentence 10 and 11 are examples of such errors:

10. She has many friends, does she?

11. This kind of work is not worth reading isn't it?

The learners broke the rule that positive statements take negative question tags while negative statements take positive question tags.

In the passive transformation, learners broke both transformational inflectional rules as illustrated below in active sentences (12 and 13) turned into passive sentences (14 and 15):

12. They are not giving children's injections.

13. The people dug trenches.

Some of the learners' answers were:

14. Did they give children's injections or injections are not giving to children.

15. The people were digging trenches or Did the people dug?

Passivation requires that the agent noun phrase replaces the subject noun phrase, a form of the verb 'be' to be added to the main verb while the main verb takes the past participle form. The tense and aspect inflections are indicated on the auxiliary verb(s) so that the tense, aspect and mood of the active voice sentence is the same as that of the passive voice sentence, and the meaning of both sentences remains the same. In the above learners' sentences, the transformations and inflections are not correctly done. For example, in the sentence, 'injections are not giving to children's', the agent noun was moved to the subject position but a form of the verb 'be' was not added to the main verb and the verb was not inflected into the past participle form to have the correct sentence as in example 16:

16. Children are not being given injections

In the previous sentence, the learner did not carry out the passive voice transformation and did not maintain the meaning. The active sentence is in the past tense but the passive is in the past tense and in the progressive aspect. Other sentences had no passivation carried out but they were only turned into questions.

The transformational rules were also broken where sentences were being turned from direct speech into indirect speech, positive to negative and statements into questions. The sentences were wrongly transformed and where verbs needed to be inflected, the inflections were wrongly done. This gave rise to double marking of verbs, regularization of verbs and use of wrong tenses and aspects. The following 3 sentences are examples of those types of errors:

17. He said he doesn't like thunderstorms

18. He asked him if he have a good trip

19. She asked him when did she arrived

The transformational rules involved in changing sentences from direct speech into reported speech require that if the reporting verb is in the past tense and the sentence in the present tense, then the sentence in the reported speech should be in the past tense. Moreover, when the direct speech sentence is in the past tense, and the speech tag is also in the past tense, the reported speech sentence takes the past perfect aspect. The reported clause is also subjected to the 'that clause', and words like 'this', 'these', 'that', 'here', and 'now', change to 'those', 'there', and 'then', while adverbials such as 'tomorrow', 'next week', and 'last year' become 'the following day' or 'week, year'; or 'previous day', 'year' etc. First and second persons change into the third person. The students would break the rules that bring about these transformations. The correct forms of the sentences should have been as follows:

20. He said that he did not like thunderstorms.

21. He asked him if he had had a good trip.

22. She asked him when he had arrived.

The students made double marking errors also when turning statements into questions. This is illustrated in the following sentences that occurred as a result of breaking rules:

23. Did the teacher visited the sick student?

24. I did not knew that I was at that at stage

The rule that one does not mark two items that belong to the same word category such as tense or third person singular as in the above examples was broken.

The psycholinguistic explanations for breaking the grammatical rules include overgeneralization of the rules, incomplete application of rules and ignorance of rules' limitations or restrictions. When learners have acquired the rules such as those for tense, then the learners generalize and extend the use of the rules where they are not appropriate. The learners would also apply the rules incompletely especially when inflecting words and also while carrying out transformations. This was common with verbs while being inflected for tense and into past participles. Rules would also be applied without observing their restrictions or limitations. As a result, concord errors, double marking errors and regularization errors would be made.

The systems of tense and aspect indicated fossilization for majority of the learners examined in the study. The highest number of errors on the analysing surface error taxonomy was that of tense and aspect which was 2,585 out of a total of 9,240 and constituted 28 percent. The students would use the present tense where they needed to use the past tense. The

perfective aspect, especially the present perfect posed a great challenge to many students. The perfective aspect requires the use of the perfective ‘have’ which must agree with the noun and therefore, inflects into its various forms. For instance, it inflects for tense to indicate whether a phrase is in present or past perfect as it combines with the verb in the past participle form as in ‘we have worked’ or ‘we had worked’. The progressive aspect requires a form of the verb ‘be’ to be added to the perfective ‘have’ and the ‘-ing’ morpheme added to the verb forming the present participle, for example, ‘we have been working’ or ‘we had been working’. The students would fail to carry out the necessary transformations or use the rules appropriately and would make errors such as the following:

25. I had ate all the food.

26. The teacher have gave a lot of money.

27.that they will have receive the price quotation by now.

The instructions required the first sentence (25) to be in the past perfect, the second (26) and third (27) to be in the present perfect as in the following sentences:

28. I had eaten all the food.

29. The teacher has given a lot of money.

30. that they have received the price quotation by now.

Apart from the area of tense and aspect, the other area that indicated fossilization was the area of the inflection subsystem. The inability to apply the inflection subsystem and the inflectional rules was evident in all the areas tested on the students’ language. This inability was manifested through the reappearance of errors of regularization, the double marking errors, concord errors, passive voice errors as well as in all the errors related to tense and aspect as already explained. The errors involving the subsystem of transformation and the transformational rules were also related to the inflection subsystem as well as the inflectional rules.

As already elucidated, the rules and the subsystems operate hand in hand; that explains why the areas that indicated fossilization had much to do with the rules, the systems and the subsystems. The total number of errors in these grammatical areas was 7,240 out 9,240 which constituted 77.5 percent of the errors that indicated fossilization. Table 1 illustrates this. It also gives a summary of the types of errors identified as indicating fossilization, their total numbers per type and the percentages they constituted.

Table 1: Error Types, Totals and Percentages

Types of Errors	Total Number of Errors Per Type	Percentages of the Error Types (to the nearest approximation)
Tense and Aspect Errors	2,585	28%
Passive Voice Errors	1,229	13%
Indirect Speech Errors	1, 102	12%
Concord Errors	899	10%
Pronoun Errors	927	10%
Double marking errors	605	6.5%
Question Tag Errors	596	6.5%
Errors on Determiners	422	4.5%
Errors on Adjectives and Adverbs	376	41%
Prepositional Errors	321	3.9%

Regularization Errors	179	2%
Total number of all types of errors is 9,240 and total percentage is 100%		

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the secondary school learners' interlanguage so as to establish whether or not the poor performance in English language recorded over a number of years was as a result of fossilization. Errors from written tests on sampled grammatical areas that manifested grammatical items that fossilize were identified, described and analysed. It was established that there were grammatical structures, rules, systems and subsystems that had become encased in the learners' interlanguage and hindered them from progressing along the language continuum to competence though learning continued. These encased items were manifested through repeated and reappearing errors. The errors on tense and aspect were the most repeated among all the types of errors. However, the areas of rules and the subsystems of inflection and transformation had more errors that indicated fossilization. Therefore, the Nakuru County learners manifested fossilization mainly in the use of grammatical systems, subsystems and rules since 70 percent of the errors indicating fossilization had to do with these areas as shown in the table above on error types, frequencies and percentages.

The areas of grammar affected by fossilization among the Nakuru County secondary school learners were found to be the verb and the verb phrase, the systems of tense and aspect, the subsystems of inflection and transformation and the grammatical rules especially of inflections and transformations. These findings can be used to formulate interventions and remedial measures to allow progress in the development of the learners' interlanguage competence. It is notable that whereas some scholars argue that fossilized items cannot be corrected, others argue that with proper teaching, these can still be corrected.

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