RESEARCH ARTICLE

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THE MORPHOSYNTACTIC INTERFACE IN ENGLISH IS A SOURCE OF GRAMMATICAL ERRORS FOR NIGERIAN USERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

The morphosyntactic interface occurs at the core of English grammatical theory and structure. It is this interface that produces morphological inflections of tense, aspect, concord and other grammatical categories of English through the assigning of syntactic rules. Many contemporary morphological theories attempt to explicate the morphosyntactic interface but most of them fall short of this aim. Stephen Anderson's A-Morphous Morphology is a theory that elucidates the morphosyntactic interface through its rigorous description of the interface and its properties which are realised through the constraining functions of its syntactic component on its morphological element. Adopting A-Morphous Morphology theory as a model of the morphosyntactic interface, this study illuminates the interface. The study notes, from findings from existing literature on contrastive studies of English and Nigerian indigenous languages, the absence (in some cases) and limited occurrence (in others) of inflectional morphology in the realisation of grammatical categories and avers this to be evidence of the absence of the morphosyntactic interface in Nigerian indigenous languages, because inflections of grammatical categories are the products of the interface. The study therefore concludes that the absence of the morphosyntactic interface in indigenous Nigerian languages engenders grammatical errors in the English use of Nigerians.

Keywords: morphosyntactic interface, syntactic component, morphological inflections, grammatical errors, Nigerian users of English

1. Introduction

The term 'morphosyntactic interface' refers to the interface, the intersection, the overlap between morphology and syntax in English grammatical theory and structure, precisely that between inflectional morphology and syntax, and the way this interface is realised in grammatical structure. In this interface, the morphology is constrained by syntactic rule and so syntactic rule determines morphological structure (Anderson 1992; Harley 2010). The result of this interface is inflections; the interface is realised through inflections (Anderson 1992). If for instance, the syntactic rule for realising a grammatical category is not correctly assigned, the inflection of that grammatical category will not be correctly configured and the interface will not be realised.

Scholars have attempted to illuminate the morphosyntactic interface by proposing morphological theories that describe this fundamental aspect of English grammar, but the theories do not sufficiently explain the interface. Some of such theories are Charles Hockett's Word and Paradigm Morphology (WP) (1954) and Gregory Stumps's version of it, Paradigm Function Morphology (PFM) (2001), Morris Halle and Alex Marantz's Distributed morphology (DM) (1993), Steele's Articulated Morphology (AM) (1995) and others. These theories are meticulous attempts to describe the morphosyntactic interface but they provide an inadequate exposition of it because they do not sufficiently expound on the functions of the syntactic component in constraining the morphological component of the interface.

2. A review of some morphological theories that describe the morphosyntactic interface

Charles Hockett's Word and Paradigm Morphology (WP) is a word-based morphological model that focuses on the word, word-forms and their functions as the basis of analysis. In this model, a word is not split into its component parts for analysis, rather prominence is given to the word-forms that are realised from a word through inflections and the functions of the word-forms so realised. Of this characteristic of the model, Bauer (2003: 197-198; 2004: 111) has described Word and Paradigm morphology as being synonymous with Stephen Anderson's A-Morphous Morphology. This analogy is accurate on account of the similarity in the theoretical focus of A-Morphous Morphology and Word and Paradigm Morphology on inflections and the morphosyntactic properties of the grammar that are realised by inflections. However, dissimilar to A-Morphous Morphology, Word and Paradigm Morphology does not exhaustively specify and describe the role of the syntax in the formation of word-forms.

Distributed Morphology (DM), formulated by Morris Halle and Alec Marantz and presented in Halle and Marantz (1993) falls within the non-lexicalist or morpheme-based tradition of morphological theories. The organising principle of Distributed Morphology is that in syntactic processes the morphology is distributed along the syntax, thus the name 'distributed morphology'. This principal viewpoint of Distributed Morphology is founded on the assumption that in morphological structure, the syntax and morphology are generated by the same rules: words are syntactically derived, not morphologically generated. In this, Distributed Morphology equates the syntactic component of the interface with the morphological component. This study does not agree with Halle and Marantz's equating the syntactic with the morphological component of the morphosyntactic interface. This study acknowledges the syntax to be superior to the morphology at the interface on account of the syntax's constraining functions on the morphology and determining the morphological features that are generated therefrom and so the study sees Distributed Morphology's equating the syntactic component with the morphological component as a limitation in its explication of the morphosyntactic interface.

Gregory Stumps' Paradigm Function Morphology (PFM), presented in *Inflectional Morphology: A Theory of Paradigm Structure* (2001) follows the tradition of Word and Paradigm Morphology and has been described by Stewart and Stump (2007: 384) as a "word-based interface between syntax and morphology". This theory articulates the paradigms of a word to be the focus of analysis rather than the word itself. Paradigm Function Morphology proposes that through the paradigms of a word, the inflections of a word can be inferred. What this perspective means is that the paradigms of a word reveal the morphosyntactic properties of that word. This is in line with the general assumptions of morphosyntactic theory but like other theories reviewed above Stump's theory offers insufficient description of the syntactic component of the morphosyntactic interface which generates the paradigms and inflections of words. In highlighting the morphosyntactic interface as proposed in Paradigm Function Morphology, Stewart and Stump (2007: 386) citing Stump (2001: 18) aver that "the interface is a featural rather than a formative one; that the syntax and morphology do not have a shared vocabulary, and that the little vocabulary shared therein excludes inflections". This

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study sees Stewart and Stumps' assertion as almost a heresy because theoretically and structurally inflections are generated by syntactic rules; inflections are the products of the morphosyntactic interface and so 'inflection' is a vocabulary shared by syntax and morphology. In their assertion, Stewart and Stump have de-recognised the role of the syntax in realising the interface. The limitation of Paradigm Functional Morphology is that it does not offer a detailed description of syntactic operations at the interface. Its description of the syntax is even more limited than that proposed in Distributed Morphology.

The major limitation of the morphological models discussed above is that they offer an incomplete, insufficient, unbalanced description of the two components of the morphosyntactic interface. They provide rigorous accounts of morphological processes at the interface but they do not exhaustively demonstrate how the syntax constrains the morphology at the interface and the assigning of syntactic rules which generates inflections.

2.1 A-Morphous Morphology theory – a model of the morphosyntactic interface

Stephen Anderson's A-Morphous Morphology theory, proposed in *A-Morphous Morphology* (1992) belongs to the class of Extended Word and Paradigm models of morphology. A-Morphous Morphology theory describes the interface between morphology and syntax, presupposing morphology to be basically inflection. In this theory, inflection is construed to be the interface of morphology and syntax expressed thus: "…inflection is precisely the domain in which the systems of syntactic and morphological rules interact" (Anderson, 1992: 74). In this definition, A-Morphous Morphology theory interprets inflections as the product of the interaction of inflectional morphology and syntax and thus the morphosyntactic interface.

2.2 The concept of inflections

Aronoff and Fudeman (2011: 159) provide the etymology of the term 'inflection' thus: "from the Latin root 'f*lect*', which means 'bend'. The term

is used to depict the different shapes or forms (paradigms) that a word can bend to or take, to fit into a particular position within the sentence". Anderson (1992: 83) defines inflection in the following way: "…inflection is the morphology that is accessible to and / or manipulated by rules of the syntax" and "the inflections of words is the syntactically relevant parts of words" (p. 85). From the foregoing therefore, in inflectional morphology, the syntax determines morphological configuration. This argument is reinforced in Harley's (2010: 5)'s submission that "in the relationship between inflectional morphology and syntax, the morphology is driven by the syntax". This relationship is the morphosytactic interface.

The primary function of inflectional morphology is to provide information about grammatical structure or to indicate grammatical categories. English has nine grammatical categories and some of them such as tense, aspect, voice, number are realised inflectionally, through inflectional morphology. The inflectional categories of English are divided into two broad groups: nominal inflections and verbal inflections. The nominal inflections specify number, gender, case, (of nouns and pro-forms), while the verbal inflections express tense, aspect, voice, mood, and number of verbs. The inflections of these grammatical categories demonstrate the interaction of syntactic rules on morphological configuration.

2.3 A-Morphous Morphology theory's elucidation of the morphosyntactic interface

The starting point of A-Morphous Morphology theory is the explication of the delineation between derivation and inflection. Stephen Anderson, the proponent of A-Morphous Morphology, points out that while derivation is optional, inflection is obligatory, and so the term morphosyntactic interface technically refers to the interface between inflectional morphology and syntax which is obligatory in the grammar. Anderson maintains that derivation is seen in one word structures while inflections operate in words that occur over phrasal domains – more than single word structures. Explicating this Anderson declares: "When words occur over phrasal domains, syntactic

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rules determine the rules for the co-occurrence of words" (Anderson, 1992: 83). In effect therefore, inflectional morphology operates in phrasal domains, in the syntax. Anderson expounds this theoretical phenomenon further: "when words occur over phrasal domains, morphological properties or inflectional properties are either assigned by the rules of syntax or are available to the rules of syntax in order to operate" (p.83). On this premise Anderson argues thus: "inflection seems to be the morphology that is accessible to and / or manipulated by rules of syntax" (p. 83). Anderson therefore begins his theory on the premise that the rules of syntax determine the morphology or inflections of words that occur over phrasal domains and these rules are expressed in the inflections of words. This assertion is demonstrated thus: in the single, untensed, base form of verb 'come' the rules of syntax are not relevant because the word occurs in isolation of other words, but in the tensed form 'came', the morphological shape and form of the word is determined by the rules that guide its co-occurrence with other words in the phrase or clause, that is the rules of syntax. In summary, the interaction of syntax and morphology produces inflections. This is the basis of the morphosyntactic interface: syntax is the constraining factor in inflectional morphology and inflection is the product of the interaction of syntax and morphology.

In further explicating the morphosyntactic interface, Anderson proposes four morphsyntactic properties of inflections, one or more of which he submits must be present in an inflection for the morphosyntactic interface to be realised in that inflection. They are

1. the configurational property which is present in every inflection

2. the agreement property which is present in number, gender and sequence of tense inflections

3. the phrasal property which occurs in tense, aspect and number inflections in verb and noun phrases respectively

4. the inherent property which occurs in gender inflections

An inflection must possess one or more of the mophosyntactic properties for the interface to be realised in that inflection (Anderson 1992: 82 – 83).

This study adopts Anderson's theoretical concept of morphosyntactic properties to demonstrate how the syntactic component of the morphosyntactic interface constrains the morphological component and how the mis-assigning of the syntactic component engenders the non-realisation of the morphosyntactic properties of inflections and thus, the non-realisation of the interface.

3. Data collection

Data for this study were collected from domains of educated English use in Nigeria such as newspaper news reports and features, and lecturers' and students' utterances. The motivation for deploying data from educated use to demonstrate the engendering of grammatical errors at the morphosyntactic interface is to show that the interfaced structure of English grammar is difficult to handle by non-native users, even educated users.

4. Data presentation

This section presents data on the non-realisation of the morphosyntactic interface which is expressed in erroneous inflections.

s/n	Data sample	source of data	Syntactic rule mis-assigned in the data	morphosyntactic properties of the interface not realised in the data
Data from newspapers				
1.	"**He** further disclosed that **its** ministry has identified 13 products that can replace oil …"	*The Guardian,* 12/1/15; pg. 4.	the rule for pronoun– antecedent gender concord	inherent property of gender inflections

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2.	"…**some** of the **sections** amended **has** not been tested and the only way you test **the constitution** is by challenging it or getting **them** interpreted by the courts…"	*The Guardian;* 13/1/15; pg. 39	the rule for number concord: subject – verb agreement and the rule for pronoun – antecedent number concord	configurational property and agreement property
3.	"…has warned that **the party stand** the chance of losing the general elections…"	*The Sun,* 3/2/15; pg. 6	the rule for number concord: subject – verb agreement	configurational property and agreement property
4.	"The alleged attempted arrest by DSS, which Fayose was **reported to have foil** is unlawful."	*New Telegraph;* 31/1/17; pg.12	the rule for tense in the verb phrase	configurational property and phrasal property
5.	"…who commissioned a renovated block of classroom and **a** toilet **facilities**…"	*New Telegraph;* 31/1/17; pg. 29	the rule for number concord in the noun phrase: head – modifier number agreement	configurational property and agreement property
6.	"… **a** cordon and search **efforts** had also started to determine the casualties suffered by the terrorists in the three encounters… "	*Punch;* 26/1/19; pg. 2	the rule for number concord in the noun phrase: head – modifier number agreement	configurational property and agreement property
7.	"… in **a** telephone **chats**…"	*Nigerian Tribune;* 30/6/20; pg. 46	the rule for number concord in the noun phrase: head – modifier number agreement	configurational property and agreement property
8.	"… which is expected to be the largest **children hospital** in the West African sub-region…"	*This Day;* 29/4/21; pg. 50	the rule for noun genitive	configurational property and phrasal property
9.	"…an initiative of the federal government which is all about and ensuring **water quality** across the country **meet** the set standard."	*Daily Trust;* 21/5/21; pg. 31	the rue for number concord: subject – verb agreement	configurational property and agreement property
Data from sundry domains of educated use				
10.	"**It depend** on the kind of research you want to do."	From a senior lecturer in a faculty of Arts in a first generation university (June 2016)	the rule for number concord: subject – verb agreement	configurational property and agreement property

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11.	"I **gave** him food, he **ate**, after eating, he **prostrate**…"	From a level four student in a faculty of Arts in a first generation university (June 2016)	the rule for sequence of tense	configurational property and agreement property

4.1 Discussion

All four morphosyntactic properties of inflections specified in A-Morphous Morphology theory are represented in the data. The properties are erroneously realised resulting in defective inflections of English grammatical categories.

In data samples 2, 3, 9, 10, the configurational property of number inflections of subject – verb agreement is not realised in the highlighted verbs, and in data samples 5, 6, 7, the configurational property of number inflections of head and modifier agreement is not realised in the highlighted data. In the second clause in data sample 2, the configurational property of number inflection of pronoun- antecedent agreement is not realised in the highlighted pronoun.

In data samples 2, 3, 9, 10 the agreement property of number inflections of subject – verb agreement is not realised in the highlighted verbs. The agreement property of inflections of pronoun and antecedent concord is not realised in the second highlighted pronoun (them) in data sample 1. The agreement property of number inflections of head and modifier agreement is absent in the highlighted noun phrases in data samples 5, 6, 7.

The phrasal property of inflections of tense is absent in the head of the highlighted verb phrase in data sample 4, and the phrasal property of genitive inflections is not realised in the highlighted noun phrase in data sample 8. In data sample 11, the agreement property of inflections of sequence of tense is not realised in the highlighted base form verb.

The inherent property of gender inflections, in this case, human/ masculine property, has not been realised in the highlighted pronoun 'its' in data sample 1, and the inherent property of genitive inflections is not realised in the highlighted noun phrase in data sample 8.

5. Perceived causes of the non-realisation of the morphosyntactic interface and resultant erroneous inflections

This study avers that the non-realisation of the morphosyntactc interface in texts and utterances produced by Nigerian users of English arises from the absence or non-occurrence of the interface in Nigerian indigenous languages. This study makes this assertion on the bases of findings from contrastive studies on the grammatical structure of English and Nigerian languages.

Studies have investigated the contrasts in the grammatical organisation of English and Nigerian languages. Some of such studies are Lamidi's (2010) examination of tense and aspect in English and Yoruba; Adebileje's (2013) description of affixation processes in English and Yoruba; Kwokwo's (2013) elucidation of the morphosyntactic interface of tense and agreement features in English and Izon; Gbaaikyo's (2014) account of phrasal structure in English and Tiv; Ogundepo's (2015) discussion of English and Yoruba morphology; Tamba's (2016) comparison of noun and verb inflectional processes in English and C'Lela; Udemmadu and Chinyeaka's (2017) discussion of word, phrasal and sentence structure in English and Igbo; Noah's (2021) rigorous illumination of tense in Efik, and others.

Findings from these and other studies demonstrate that tense, aspect, concord and other grammatical categories in many Nigerian languages are not realised inflectionally as they are in English; they are realised lexically. For instance, tense in Nigerian languages is realised by the deployment of a lexical item, an adverbial that pre or post modifies the verb and indicates time diexis. Sometimes, tense is signaled by a shift in tone. Also, plural nouns in Nigerian languages are not formed by inflectional morphology through the assigning of syntactic rules as they are in English; rather they are formed lexically, by the use of a nominal ordinal or cardinal

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which pre or post modifies the noun. So also are singular verbs in Nigerian languages not formed by the insertion of inflections of number as they are in English; rather, they are realised by lexical categories of number.

The findings from contrastive studies establish the absence of inflectional morphology in Nigerian languages, and the absence of inflectional morphology manifests the absence of the morphosyntactic interface because inflections are the product of the interface. This study adduces from the findings from contrastive studies of English and Nigerian languages the absence of the morphosyntactic interface in Nigerian languages.

5.1 Conclusion

The grammatical errors in the data arise from the non-realisation of the interfaced morphosyntactic structure of English grammar which this study adduces, from the findings of contrastive studies of English and Nigerian languages, to be absent in the latter. The interface requires its two components – syntax and inflectional morphology, to be correctly represented, for it to be realised. This is because the interface is the information and representation that is provided by its two components. In this interface which occurs in all grammatical categories of English, the syntax constrains the morphology and determines the morphological configuration of inflections. If the syntactic component is erroneously assigned or applied, the interface which is expressed in inflections cannot be correctly established and errors are derived. In the data samples, this requirement of the interface is not met; the syntactic component is erroneously applied thereby generating defective inflections. This study concludes therefore that, the interfaced morphosyntactic structure of English grammar engenders grammatical errors by Nigerian users of English and this derives from the non-occurrence or absence of the interface in Nigerian languages.

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Bernadette C. Ogbonna (PhD): a brief autobiography

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