RESEARCH ARTICLE

Complement Stranding in Determiner Phrases in Nigerian English

Maria-Helen Ekah

Department of English, University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria
Email:dr. mariahelen@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study on "Complement Stranding in Determiner Phrases in Nigerian English" examines the use of determiners in a second language situation like Nigeria with specific reference to determiners of the articles class. Determiners as functional heads subcategorise NP (noun phrase) complements. The situation discussed involves the use of NP complement without the head which subcategorises it. The Minimalist Program and Principles and Parameters Theory provide the insight for this discussion. Our data show the preponderance of inappropriate use of determiners, specifically of the article class. Our findings have established that a determiner phrase (DP) is a constituent phrase consisting of a determiner and a noun, with the determiner as the head of the phrase while the NP functions as its complement. The data show that the selection of a noun complement without its head makes a sentence infelicitous unless the NP complement is a bare nominal. It is also observed that the use of singular nouns as bare nominal as it is in some of the tokens is inappropriate as it produces ungrammatical expressions. The study further reveals that the selection of the determiner head follows some phonological rules in certain circumstances whereby the indefinite determiner a c-selects (complement selects) a nominal complement that is initiated by [+ consonant] [- vowel] while the indefinite determiner an c-selects a nominal complement that is [- consonant] [+ vowel] else the sentence will not be licensed as the ungrammaticality of the subjects' output shows. It is concluded that the deletion of a determiner constituent critical to the appropriateness of an utterance violates the d-selection (determiner selection) restrictions which determiners impose on their complements.

Key words: Determiners, complement, bare nominal, c-selection

1.0   Introduction

All languages have their linguistic principles which form the bases of choices by language users. These principles are very complex, indexes which, quite often, make linguistic choices difficult, especially to L2 users of the language, a situation which Nigeria English bilinguals encounter. A second language user is therefore faced with an array of language structures and each of these structures is intricate in nature. The study of linguistic principles reveals that whereas a first language learner does not encounter much difficulties in mastering the rules and the application of the rules of his language in contextually relevant situations, except in the areas of vocabulary, idioms and proverbs which he has to learn, a second language learners productions in sounds, word choice, sentence constructions and so on, are filled with deviant usages as a result of

inappropriate linguistic choices (Jowitt, 2013, Essien, 2003, Jowitt, 2013). This paper examines the use of determiners, particularly articles, by Nigerian users of English.

2.0   Methodology

The choice of data is based on the recurrence of deviant usages of determiners in both spoken and written contexts by the bilinguals in focus. The fact that these deviant forms feature regularly in formal and informal situations even by those who have undergone substantial training in English make this area of study a potent subject of investigation. The tokens were collected from different situations of language use and are representative examples of the use of articles among these bilinguals.

Accepted that certain circumstances such as, tiredness, boredom, period of the day, slip of the tongue, etc., as canvassed by Chomsky, (1965) can induce performance errors in informal communication, deviant forms in formal usages are most likely suggestive of lack of the knowledge of how to use certain grammatical items like determiners.

3.0 The Determiner Class

English words are classified into lexical and functional categories. While lexical categories have independent meaning, functional categories enter into relationships with other words to express meaning. The concern of this investigation is on functional categories, specifically determiners, and not lexical categories.

The grammatical category of determiners functions as the head of nominal phrases (Abney, 1987 cited in Radford, 2004). Syntactically, a determiner indicates the presence of a noun and semantically co-occurs with a noun to express such semantic information as quantity and number (Crystal, 1997, Ndimele, 1999). The principal function of a determiner is to specify a noun as well as limit the reference of noun expressions, and an adjective can follow it as the specifier of a noun. The combination of a determiner with a noun expression results in the formation of a determiner phrase (DP) with the determiner typically abbreviated as Det or D as the head (Radford, 2004). The fact is that every determiner subcategorises an NP complement and it is the determiner and its NP complement which conjoin to form a Determiner Phrase(DP) as the following tree configuration shows:
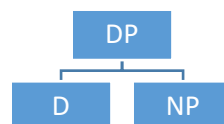

Fig. 1: Determiner Phrase configuration in English

The configuration shows that D (or Det) can only occur in pre-head position and not in post-position since a determiner cannot be subcategorized by a noun (N) rather a determiner subcategorises an NP as its complement. The other element in this structure – the NP illustrates further branching of the DP structure.The tree also shows that there is only one slot for a determiner in a determiner phrase which means that only one determiner can occur in any DP (Adger, 2003, Greenbaum& Nelson, 2009, Carnie, 2011). The Hierarchy of Projections provide only one slot for members of the category of determiners be they possessives, numerals, quantifiers, demonstratives, articles (our focal point) and pronoun determiners and also specifies the category and the position of all functional categories in the clause whether they are complementizers, auxiliaries, pronouns, etc. This information is critical to this discussion.

In English, complements are on the right of the head and the determiner, as expressed in Fig. 1, is the head of the DP, according to Abney (1987)cited in Radford (2004). Consequently, word order is determined by the head-on-the-left setting of the parameter as in the following:
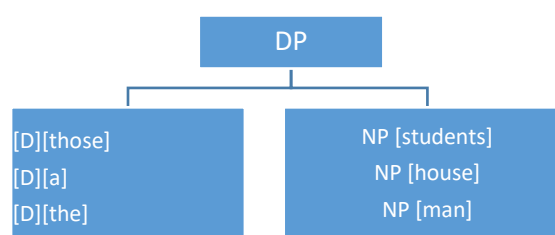

Fig. 2: A tree configuration indicating determiner and noun relationship

Maria-Helen Ekah

The NP *students* is the complement to the D *those* following the DN (determiner noun) order of the DP in English; *house* is the complement of *a* and *man* is the complement of *the* in *the house* with each of the determiners expressing some meaning relationships with their respective complement NPs.

A determiner selects a complement NP which is compatible with it in gender, number and person in line with the principle of operation select in the Minimalist Program after which operation merge applies (Agbedo, 2015). Merge can operate on lexical items like the ones already shown whereby *those* merges with *students* to yield *those students*, *a* merges with *house* to yield *a house* and *the* merges with *man* to give *the man* each of which is a determiner phrase. The configuration for *those students*, for instance, is therefore merge (those, students) → {those, {those, students}} after which the merged items are moved to the articulatory perceptual, that is, the Phonetic Form, for interpretation. Determiners are, therefore, closely associated with nouns since they determine the referential properties of noun expressions they occur with (Radford, 2004). English sentences, therefore, contain definite and indefinite articles like *the/a*, numerals like *one*, possessives like *my*, demonstratives like *this/that* and quantifiers like *some*. All the italicized words are referential determiners of their respective noun expressions since the principal function of a determiner is to specify the referential properties of a noun. Based on our discussions so far, the internal structure of a determiner phrase includes: quantifiers, possessives, demonstratives, numerals, articles and pronouns and they are critical to the expression of meaning.

4.0   Data Presentation

1. *The discussion was in *very friendly atmosphere*.
2. *He left after looking everywhere for *chair* to sit down but could not find any.
3. *He attends *university* in the South of Nigeria.
4. *She stopped farming the day she saw *big snake* in her farm.
5. **Insect* pinched him while sleeping.
6. *The decision is not acceptable to us because the legislators used *yes/no vote* to pass the motion.
7. *Tomorrow is *public holiday*. How are you going to spend it?
8. *Of all the ministers appointed by the President, only one is *man* of integrity.
9. *He is called honorable but he is not *a honorable man.*
10. *Among all the witnesses, only one gave *a honest response*.
11. *It was just *a hour* lecture.
12. *Honourable Obaze is *an house member* in one of the States' Houses of Assembly.

5.0   Analysis of Data/Discussion

The data are discussed according to the selectional patterns of the determiners in terms of absence of determiners where they need to appear or wrong choices of determiners. The respective noun expressions which require referential determiners are italicized.

5.1   Non-Selection of Determiners

In Entries I, 2, 3, 4 5, 6 and 7, the noun expressions *atmosphere, chair, university, snake, insect, yes/no* as well as *public holiday* are NPs which function as complements of determiners but erroneously the complements are not specified whereas complements always occur with respect to their heads, in which case, a determiner phrase takes a determiner as its head. All the italicized noun expressions should be determiner phrases by their own right since a determiner phrase takes a determiner as its head and determiners specify the referential properties of their respective nouns and in the selection of heads, determiners are heads of DPs with NPs as their complements (Koopman, 1984, Abney, 1987 cited in Radford 2004, Adger 2003, Radford 2004). Any violation of this linguistic principle leads to infelicity of the output as evidenced in the entries. As may be gleaned from the examples, there is no determiner in an otherwise determiner phrase – an omission which leaves the noun expressions stranded thereby violating the head parameter setting of the DP in English in which a DP is headed by a D unless it is a bare nominal, a violation which has resulted in the ungrammaticality of the output.

Entries 1 – 7 require determiners of the article class, a term used in traditional grammar to describe determiners such as the/a/an used in the modification of nouns in order to pick out definite and indefinite

Maria-Helen Ekah

referents since determiners specify the referential properties of their respective nouns. These articles are also referred to as specific and non-specific modifiers or definite and indefinite determiners (Eka, 1994, Adger, 2003).Based on syntactic criterion, in Entries 1 and 2, the NP complements *atmosphere* and *chair* are complements of a determiner but the determiner is not specified in each of these expressions, the reason these sentences have crashed. In Entry 3, *He attends university in the South,*the V (verb) *attends* c-selects (complement selects) the NP complement *university* instead of a DP which it requires with *university* as complement of the D which is [a]. The deletion of the head [a], (a university), in this case, makes the entire sentence infelicitous. Syntactically, the verb *attends* c-selects a DP as its complement and not an N since this type of verb cannot directly sub-categorise a noun without an intervening D. In Entry 4, *She stopped farming the day she saw snake in his farm,* the nominal expression *snake* requires a determiner of the article class to express meaning but it is omitted. In the same way as Entry 3, the V *killed*c-selects a determiner phrase with an overt determiner as its complement and not a bare nominal which is why the sentence is inappropriate.

In Entries 6 and 7, *yes/no vote* and *public holiday* are NP complements of their DPs but the determiner which the respective complements (*vote/holiday*) subcategorises is not specified. *Yes/no* as well as *public* are adjectivals qualifying the nouns *vote* and *holiday* respectively but this does not block the head D from taking its position as head introducer. The NPs under consideration require determiners, and as a grammatical rule determiners, quantifiers and adjectives may occur together to modify a noun in the order of determiner + adjective + noun (Radford, 2004). Following this order, therefore, the determiner will always occur in DPs. Consequently, all the NPs in Entries 6 and 7 are complements of a determiner and cannot be separated from their phrase introducing heads. The head introducer in this case is the determiner [a]. The fact is that a head selects its complement and the complement selected by the head must be present since "complements depend on the properties of the head" (Fromkin, Rodman, Hymas& Hummel, 2006, p.120). It is therefore wrong to have an NP complement without its head as it is with the entries at issue unless the complement is a bare nominal.

Even though English allows bare nominal phrases, that is, nominal phrases that are not introduced by determiners, but such phrases are not just nouns in the ordinary sense but DPs (determiner phrases) else they will not satisfy the selectional requirements of verbs. In the first instance, the complement of a determiner may be pluralized, in that**vote**and **holiday**can be pluralized as in:

(a) Senate uses *yes/no* votes to pass motions.

(b) She enjoys public *holidays.*

The verb *uses* in (a) c-selects a DP (yes/no votes) while the verb *enjoys*in (b)c-selects a DP (public holidays) with *yes/no* and *public* functioning as adjectivals. The c-selection process suggests that these DPs can co-occur with determiners like a/the**.** The bare nominals (*votes/holidays*) are DPs even though the determiner(s) which subcategorize(s) it/them does/do not appear on the phonetic form (PF). A tree configuration representation explains this point better:
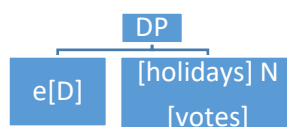

Fig. 3: Complement Selection Process in a Determiner Phrase.

The tree configuration shows that an English bare nominal is a DP;it is a plural noun with a null determiner, a null determiner being that determiner phrase which has only a noun expression and does not require the presence of anovert determiner to be a determiner phrase as specified by the Hierarchy of Projections of determiner phrases (Radford, 2004).

It is observed that in Entries 5, 6 and 7, *insect, vote* and *holiday* which are in their singular forms are used as null (θ) determiners whereas no null determiner, according to Radford, combines with a singular noun in English but only bare nominals do because such a combination is unacceptable and inappropriate. Semantically, the noun referents *insect/vote/holiday* may be used in singular and plural senses but it is only in the plural sense that such referents can serve as bare nominals and not in the sense of the entries under consideration in which *a/an* respectively are deleted. This is the very reason the expressions – *Insect pinched*

*me, *The legislators used yes/no vote, *Tomorrow is going to be public holiday* have crashed at the level of its phonetic realization.

In addition, the infelicity in the data is also due to the fact that a singular count noun like *atmosphere, chair, university, insect, vote* or *holiday* cannot function independently as complete noun expressions, rather they demand a modifying determiner like a/the to express meaning. They cannot, as well, function independently even if modified by an adjective as in *very friendly atmosphere, yes/no* vote and *public* holiday in which the italicized constituents perform adjectival functions as the infelicity of the perceived phrases show because semantically, a bare nominal expresses either general or portative quantity (Radford, 2004) none of which is shown in our tokens.

If the article [a] is inserted in Entries 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 and 7 and [an] in Entry 5, the sentences will be licensed as appropriate because the appropriate semantic interpretation is assigned to the noun since determiners of the article class attribute properties of definiteness (the) and indefiniteness (a/an) to the noun. The articles the/a/anare critical to the phrase they appear since determiners have semantic content and apart from attributing some properties to the noun they modify, they also limit the scope of noun expressions by specifying the nominal they are expressed. Whereas *a as well as an* specifies indefinite interpretation, *the* specifies definite interpretation (Leech & Svartvik, 2013).Adger (2003, p.252) explains that the combination of determiners with a complex constituent (NP) contains semantic information in terms of "familiarity, quantification as well as occur in complementary distribution" specifying that it is only a determiner which must occur in a particular position in a DP for that sentence to be licensed. The expressions under consideration should semantically select (s-select) *a/an* (indefinite determiners) to express meaning. Their absence has led to pragmatic unacceptability.

The absence of a required constituent in the word order of a sentence therefore may lead to infelicity. Due to the absence of the required determiner in each of the sentences, the expressions have failed to specify the quantity of the referent, neither is there any attributive property of the referents – *atmosphere, chair, university, insect, vote* and *holiday* specified**.** Apart from the failure to specify the quantity of the noun expressions required by the nominal, they also breach quantity and agreement relationship which a determiner usually enters with its constituents (Adger, 2003). Determiner and agreement relationship between the articles and their respective referents is critical to grammaticality.

5.2 Improper Selection of Indefinite Determiners

Whereas in the entries so far discussed, non-selection of a determiner where it is required leads to ungrammaticality, Entries 8 (*Of all the Ministers appointed by the President, only one is man of integrity*), 9(*He is called honourable but he is not a honourable man)*, 10 (*Among all the witnesses, only one gave a honest answer*), 11 (*It was a hour lecture*) and 12 (*Honourable Obaze is an house member in one of the States' Houses of Assembly*) are characterised by improper selection of determiners and the selection process is predicated on the interface between phonology and syntax. Observed in the entries are the wrong choices of the indefinite determiners *a/an*. The choice of these articles usually follows phonological rules. Syntactically, the article *a* selects an NP complement which phonologically starts with a consonant sound, but this principle is violated in the data in focus. The NPs *honourable, honest, hour* and *house* start with the letter "h" but this letter is not phonetically realized, meaning that the *h* is silent. It is the phonetic realization which determines the kind of indefinite determiner which precedes it. The actual realization of *honourable/honest* starts with the pure vowel /ɔ/ and not the consonant sound /h/ while *hour* starts with the vowel /a/ and not the consonant sound /h/. The infelicities of these entries are due to the ignorance of the rules governing the appropriate choice of the articles *a/an*as grammatical units.

Ignorance in the selection of definite determiners among these bilinguals is further strengthened in Entry 12 (… *an House Member*) where the initial consonant /h/ which should be overtly realized is made silent. The fact is that *honourable, honest* and *hour,* by virtue of starting phonetically with vowel sounds, attract the indefinite determiner *an* while *house,* by virtue of starting with a consonant sound attract the indefinite determiner *a.* These are the only indices these sentences can be felicitous.

Maria-Helen Ekah

IJELR
www.ijelr.in

6.0   Summary and Conclusion

In summary, Determiners (articles) occur with noun phrases (NPs) as heads for their full interpretation because semantically they express some sense. However, our investigation reveals habitual deletion of determiners (Dets) from supposedly determiner phrases (DPs) thereby leaving the NPs which are complements of the determiners stranded. Such NP complements stranding leads to ungrammaticality as our data show.

All the phrases under consideration are not well-formed in one way or the other since every phrase has its selectional requirement. The well-formedness of a phrase is determined by conformity to the selectional requirements of the head, but the tokens under consideration have violated the requirements of a determiner phrase where they are constituents of because nominal expressions are in every circumstance of usage projections of a head constituent. The NPs at issue are complements of determiner heads and need to specify the appropriate head constituents for them to be appropriately expressed.

References

Adger, David. (2003). *Core Syntax: A Minimalist Approach.* Oxford: Oxford University   Press

Carnie, Andrew. (2000). *Syntax: A Generative Introduction.* (2nd Edition).Blackwell Publishing.

Chomsky, Noam. (1957). *Syntactic Structures.* Mouton: The Hague.

_____. (1965). *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax.*Cambridge Mass: MIT Press.

_____. (1981). *Lectures on Government and Binding*.Foris: Dordrecht.

_____. (1995). *The Minimalist Programm.* Cambridge Mass: MIT Press.

Crystal, David. (1997). *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics.*(4th Edition). Oxford: Blackwell.

Essien, Okon. (2003). National Development, Language & Language Policy in Nigeria.In Essien, Okon.& Okon, Margaret-Mary. *Topical Issues in Sociolinguistics: The Nigerian Perspective*. Port Harcourt: Emhai Printing & Publishing.

Fromkin, Victoria., Rodman, Robert, Hymas, Nina, Hummel, Kirsten (2006). *An Introduction to Language.(3rd Edition.)* Canada: Nelson.

Greenbaum, Sidney. & Nelson, Gerald. (2009). *An Introduction to English Grammar.* (3rd Edition). Edinburgh: Pearson Education.

Jowitt, David. (1991). *Nigerian English Usage: An Introduction*. Ikeja: Learn Africa.

_____. (2013). English Studies and Interdisciplinarity: Some Considerations. In Josiah, Ubong. (Ed.) *A Journal of Research in Nigerian English and Literature*. Vol. 10, pp. 1 – 15.

Leech, G. & Svartvik, J. (2013).*A Communicative Grammar of English.* New York: Routledge.

Ndimele, Ozo-Mekuri. (1996). *An Advanced English Grammar & Usage.* (Revised Edition) Aba: National Institute for Nigerian Languages.

Ndimele, Ozo-Mekuri.(1999). *Morphology and Syntax.*Port Harcourt: M. & J. Grand Orbit Communication.

Radford, Andrew. (1981). *Transformational Syntax.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____. (1997). *Syntax: A Minimalist Introduction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____. (2004). *English Syntax: An Introduction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.