A Contrastive Analysis of the Verb Phrase in English and Ɛŋgwo: Some Pedagogical Implications

Paul Mbufong  
University of Douala, Douala, Cameroon

Fontem A. Neba  
University of Buea, Buea, Cameroon

Abianji Emmanuel  
Government High School Ekona, Ekona, Cameroon

This study sets out to perform a contrastive analysis of the verb phrase in English and Ɛŋgwo. This is because it is suspected that the differences between the components of the verb phrase in both languages may account for some of the errors that native speakers of Ɛŋgwo learning English as a second language commit. Special attention was to verb phrase components and their placement in verb phrase structure. Sample verb phrases were collected from recorded speeches, interviews, observations, and the researchers’ knowledge of both languages. The data were then analyzed. The results of the research suggest that the components of the verb phrase in both languages pose few problems but their placement in verb phrase structure and the modifications they undergo account for many of the numerous errors that native speakers of Ɛŋgwo make when learning English as a second language.

Keywords: contrastive analysis, verb phrase, pedagogy

Introduction

The desire to learn English either as a second or foreign language is increasing in Cameroon. Cameroon is a country where English is learned as a second language by English speaking Cameroonians (Anglophones) and as a foreign language by French speaking Cameroonians (Francophones). The language is given a high coefficient in class and certificate examinations. It is also given a high premium in professional examinations.

There is an increasing effort made by learners to avoid errors in the target language. Despite these efforts, their utterances in the target language are not error free. The errors are numerous and varied. A study of these errors reveals that many of them result from the negative transfer of features from the learner’s mother tongue to the target language while others result from the learner’s attempt to reproduce the rules of the target language he or she has formulated or memorized.

Contrastive analysis, a term coined by Lado (1957), seeks to establish the similarities and differences between languages with the assumption that the areas of similarities will be easier to study in a target language while differences will pose learning difficulties (Bouton, 1970; Gradman, 1971; James, 1976, 1980).

This research seeks to perform a contrastive analysis of the verb phrase in English and Ɛŋgwo. It intends to
compare and contrast verb phrases in both languages, and to attempt to establish the areas which might pose problems to learners of English as a second language with Éngwo as a first language.

Éngwo is the native language spoken by the Ngwo people found in Njikwa Sub-Division in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. It is one of the 279 native languages spoken in Cameroon (Tanda, 2006).

Éngwo has co-existed with English for a long time. Éngwo also makes use of English words that have been borrowed and adjusted phonologically (see Example (1)).

Example (1) Pen épenn
                Ball bɔrɔ
                Towel tawɔt

The relationship between both languages can be felt even in the educational milieu. Ngwo students who are in the same school, at the same level of education and who are taught in school using English often revise or discuss their school subjects among themselves in Éngwo though they will have to write the subjects in English.

It is for this reason that the present research seeks to find out if the similarities and differences between the verb phrase components in both languages can account for the numerous errors involving the verb phrase that native Éngwo speakers make in learning English as a second language.

The study is very necessary when one looks at the fact that very little has been written about Éngwo (Ntembe, 1987; Abianji, 1999).

Materials and Method

The main method of data collection is a form similar in nature to the Grammar Translation Method that was propounded by Johann Seidenstucker, Karl Plotz, H. S. Ollendorf, and John Meidinger in that “it approaches the language first through detailed analysis of its grammar rules followed by application of this knowledge to the task of translating sentences and texts into and out of the target language” (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1995). This research is therefore based on a series of verb phrases that have been given in Éngwo, and then, translated into English and vice versa.

Because no previous attempt has been made to classify the components of the verb phrase in Éngwo, the components have thus been classified following the English classification. The components in Éngwo are therefore based on the English components to see how they can be realized in Éngwo. The other components in Éngwo that do not exist in English have also been considered. Data were then collected in both languages, placed side by side and contrasted.

Contrastive Analysis and Discussion of Results

This involves comparing and contrasting verb phrases in English and Éngwo and predicting the errors that are likely to occur.

Verb Phrases Containing Modal Verbs

This involves verb phrases that make use of English modals such as may, might, can, could, will, would, shall, etc. (see Example (2)).
A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE VERB PHRASE IN ENGLISH AND ÊGWO

Example (2a) He may eat
He might eat
He can eat
He would eat

Example (2b) They may eat
They might eat
They can eat
They would eat

Example (2c) I will sing a song
The will sing a song
I could dance
They could dance

Example (2d) She could dance
They could dance

Of the auxiliaries in English, may, might, would, will, and shall express the possibility of the action of the verb taking place now or in the future. Could is used to show the possibility of the action of the verb in the past.

As can be seen from the data above, Êgwo has only two forms which can be used for may, might, can, and would which are wun (see Example (2a)) if the subject is singular and bong (see Example (2b)) if the subject is plural. Equally, will vary depending on whether the subject with which it is used is singular or plural. If the subject is singular, wango (see Example (2c)) is used, and if the subject is plural, bango (see Example (2c)) is used. Unlike the other auxiliaries that vary when used with singular or plural subjects, could remains the same anm in (see Example (2d)) whether it is used in the singular or in the plural.

From the above data, one can predict that there may be semantic errors resulting from the misuse of modals since there are more modals in English than in Êgwo. The native Êgwo speakers may not be able to know the difference between the following sentences since they mean the same thing in Êgwo (see Example (3)).

Example (3) They look at me
They may look at me
They might look at me
They would look at me

Verb Phrases Containing Finite Verbs/Tenses

The finite form of a verb is used to show agreement with the subject and to show agreement with the subject and to indicate tense. It is the most widely used form of the verb.

Example (4) English

Write
I am writing English
We are writing English
She writes English
They write English
I ate rice

Êgwo

njwe te

ŋm wa njwe te gkar a (*I am write English)

mbio ba njwe te gkar a (*we are write English)

ŋgo wa njwe te gkar a (*she is write English)

ango ba njwe te gkar a (*they are write English)

ŋm aŋ nde ali fi (*I [past tense marker] eat rice)

1 The star indicates that the structure is ungrammatical in standard English.
We ate rice  mbio aa nde aliʃ (*we [past tense marker] eat rice)
We will speak to him mbio ba gama bo ango (we will speak [pl] to him)
I will speak to him ɛmg wa ga bo ɲgo (I will speak [sg] to him)

The sentences in Example (4) involve verb phrases that contain finite verbs/tenses in English and Ɛŋgwo. They have been carefully selected to show the various aspects of the verb phrase in both languages. When a verb is used in the infinitive in English, there is no problem to realize it in Ɛŋgwo. Problems arise when the verb is conjugated. This is because tenses are realized in Ɛŋgwo through the use of auxiliary verbs which most often vary depending on whether the subjects with which they are used are singular or plural. In the present continuous tense, we see that “is” in Ɛŋgwo is realized as “wa” and “are” is realized as “ba” and the verb that comes after any of them is not conjugated as seen in the cases of “wa ɲɛɛwɛ—is writing” and “ba ɲɛɛwɛ—are writing”.

With regards to the simple present tense in English, the verb is inflected for tense by the addition of an “s” to the verb if the subject is singular except when “I” is used as the subject. No “s” is added if the subject is singular. In Ɛŋgwo, this tense is realized in the same way like the present continuous tense as seen in Example (5).

Example (5) English  Ɛŋgwo
She writes ɛjo wa ɲɛɛwɛ
They write ɲgo ba ɲɛɛwɛ

Some verbs are inflected in Ɛŋgwo but this is for plurality as seen in the examples involving speak (see Example (6)).

Example (6) We will speak mbio ba gama (gama = speak [plural])
I will speak ɛmg wa ga (ga = speak [singular])

We see here that if the subject is singular “I”, “ga = speak” which is not inflected for plurality is used. If the subject is plural “we”, “gama = speak” which is inflected for plurality id used. In the case of “ate” where the verb is conjugated in the past tense, the tense is realized through the position of “aa” (a tense marker) in front of the verb, and then, a verb in the infinitive.

From the data, it can be predicted that native Ɛŋgwo speakers may tend to use an auxiliary followed by a verb in the infinitive, since it is a structure common in their language, there by producing asyntactic English sentences as shown in Example (7):

Example (7) They have eat ɲgo ʃi ndɛ (ʃi ndɛ = have eat)
She has go ɲgo ʃi ɲgo (ʃi ɲgo = has go)

They may tend to add the tense marker “s” or “es” to a verb thinking they are inflecting the verb for plurality since some verbs are inflected in Ɛŋgwo for plurality as in Example (8):

Example (8) They have gone ɲgo ʃi ɲgoro (ʃi ɲgoro = have goes) *They goes
She has gone ɲgo ʃi ɲgo (ʃi ɲgo = has go) *She has go

Reduplication of Verbs
Verbs in Ɛŋgwo are most often reduplicated. Almost all verbs in Ɛŋgwo can be reduplicated. The effect of reduplication will depend on the intension of the speaker and what the hearer makes of the situation. This process is done for different reasons. It can be for encouragement, or to minimize the stress involved in the execution of the action of the verb. It can be for emphasis or to communicate the effect of the English “just”. Reduplication is
at times used to show the type of terrain one is moving on. Verbs may be reduplicated more than twice but this is most often to show that the action of the verb took place over a long period of time.

Example (9)  
\(d\)\(o\) \(d\)\(o\) \(n\)\(g\)o \( *\)\(r\)\(u\)\(n\) \(r\)\(u\)\(n\) \(g\)o  
\(k\)\(w\)\(o\) \(r\)\(o\) \(a\)\(m\) \(a\)\(s\) \(a\)\(s\) \(f\)\(i\)  
\(g\)\(a\) \(g\)\(a\) \(a\)\(m\) \(a\)\(m\) \( (\)\(t\)\(o\) \(w\)\(a\)\(l\) \(e\)\(v\) \(l\)\(e\)\(v\) \(l\)\(e\)\(v\)\()\)  
\(d\)\(a\) \(r\)\(a\) \(r\)\(a\) \(n\)\(g\)o \( (\)\(t\)\(o\) \(w\)\(a\)\(l\) \(e\)\(v\) \(l\)\(e\)\(v\) \(l\)\(e\)\(v\)\()\)  
\(k\)\(w\)\(a\) \(k\)\(w\)\(a\) \(z\)\(e\) \( (\)\(c\)\(l\)\(i\)\(m\) \(c\)\(l\)\(i\)\(m\) \(c\)\(l\)\(i\)\(m\)\()\)  
\(g\)\(e\)\(p\) \( \)\(g\)\(a\) \(g\)\(a\) \(g\)\(a\) \( (\)\(i\)\(t\)\(s\)\(c\)\(l\)\(i\)\(m\) \(c\)\(l\)\(i\)\(m\) \(c\)\(l\)\(i\)\(m\)\()\)  

The sentences in Example (9) have been used to show the reduplication of verbs. The verbs “\(d\)\(a\)\(r\)\(a\)\(r\)\(a\)\(n\)\(g\)o” and “\(k\)\(w\)\(a\)\(k\)\(w\)\(a\)\(z\)\(e\)” are used to show the type of terrain on which one is moving but “\(d\)\(a\)\(r\)\(a\)\(r\)\(a\)\(n\)\(g\)o” has not got an English equivalent as “walk” cannot sufficiently describe it. Together with the other verbs they are reduplicated to achieve any of the other reasons already stated.

Borrowed Auxiliaries

Auxiliary verbs have been borrowed from English to \(E\)\(n\)gwo to be used in expressions needing auxiliaries that \(E\)\(n\)gwo has no auxiliaries for. The main auxiliary that has been borrowed from English is must which is pronounced in \(E\)\(n\)gwo \([m\:\\alpha\:\\i\i\]\). “\(G\)\(e\)” is a verb that has been borrowed from English but is used as an auxiliary verb in \(E\)\(n\)gwo to stand for either “\(h\)\(a\)\(s\)” or “\(h\)\(a\)\(v\)\(e\)” as seen in Example (10):

Example (10)  
You must eat \(E\)\(n\)gwo \(w\)\(a\) \(m\:\\alpha\:\\i\i\) \(n\)\(d\)\(e\) \( (\)\(Y\)\(o\)\(u\) \(h\)\(a\)\(v\)\(e\) \(m\)\(a\)\(s\) \(e\)\(a\)\(m\)\()\)  
Joe has to go \(E\)\(n\)gwo \(w\)\(u\) \(g\)\(e\)\(r\) \(g\)\(o\) \( (\)\(J\)\(o\)\(e\) \(h\)\(a\)\(v\)\(e\) \(g\)\(o\)\()\)  
They have to come \(E\)\(n\)gwo \(b\)\(u\) \(g\)\(e\)\(r\) \(z\)\(e\) \( (\)\(T\)\(h\)\(e\) \(h\)\(a\)\(v\)\(e\) \(c\)\(o\)\(m\)\()\)  

From the above data, it can be predicted that “must” will pose no problem to the learners since it is borrowed with its meaning in English, but “\(g\)\(e\)” will pose a problem as the learners may tend to use it as an auxiliary, thereby producing asyntactic sentences as shown in Example (11):

Example (11)  
*You get to do the work \(E\)\(n\)gwo \(w\)\(u\) \(g\)\(e\)\(r\) \(f\)\(e\)\(\)\(a\)\(t\) \(j\)\(e\) \( (\)\(Y\)\(o\)\(u\) \(h\)\(a\)\(v\)\(e\) \(d\)\(o\) \(j\)\(e\)\()\)  
*You get to do the assignment \(E\)\(n\)gwo \(w\)\(u\) \(g\)\(e\)\(r\) \(g\)\(a\) \(a\)\(m\) \(j\)\(e\) \( (\)\(Y\)\(o\)\(u\) \(h\)\(a\)\(v\)\(e\) \(d\)\(o\) \(j\)\(e\)\()\)  

Conclusions: Pedagogical Implications

The above study focused on the differences that exist between the components of the verb phrase in English and \(E\)\(n\)gwo to predict the errors that are likely to be committed by a native \(E\)\(n\)gwo speaker learning English as a second language. Using sample verb phrases containing modal auxiliaries, finite verbs, and borrowed auxiliaries from English to \(E\)\(n\)gwo and reduplication of verbs in \(E\)\(n\)gwo, the study was able to relate the verb phrases to the likely errors that a native \(E\)\(n\)gwo speaker will commit when learning English as a second language. It is worth noting here that these are only predictions that are likely to occur. Some or all may occur with different learners. None of the errors may even be found with some of the learners since language study differs from learner to learner.

A teacher of English to these \(E\)\(n\)gwo native speakers should be expected to meet some of these errors and so should be better prepared to overcome them. Contrastive analysis can be used to predict the hierarchy of difficulty in learning English as a second language to a native \(E\)\(n\)gwo speaker. This will go a long way to help structure the English language lesson, beginning with the areas of similarities to the areas of differences. Even the
difficult areas can be structured from the less difficult to the most difficult to facilitate learning by the learners. These and other suggestions could help to reduce the learners’ difficulties.

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