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The English Primary Auxiliary Verbs: A Linguistic Theoretical Exercise (Pp.56-65)

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Abstract

Obviously, the fact remains that English Language is a sensitive Language that cannot be ignored by any one, most especially, in Nigeria where the said language is used officially for effective communication. This is why speakers of this language need to be conscious of what kinds of sentence they use in communication with other people in the environment which they find themselves. This paper aims at carrying out linguistic theoretical exercise as regards the use of the English primary auxiliary verbs. The paper also aims at exposing the rate at which speakers of English Language misuse the English primary auxiliary verbs. The traditional grammar alongside structural grammar was used to analyze the numerous uses of the English auxiliary verbs by our subjects.

Introduction

English auxiliary verbs, as the name implies, are simply called helping or supporting verbs (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of current English: 1995). They are so called because of the functions, which they perform in communication. They help to make up the verbal group in sentences, that is, they support the main verbs which could either be transitive or intransitive. This is meant to communicate meaning fully in sentences where they are used.

Even though the English auxiliary verbs are of two kinds: Primary and Modal auxiliary verbs, the English primary auxiliary verbs, which are the focus of this paper, are different from those of the modal auxiliary verbs in that the former is used as lexical verbs in our sentences. In other words, they sometimes exist on their own, apart from functioning as helping verbs. The modal auxiliary verbs cannot function as lexical verbs. They only serve as helping verbs. With the additional function, which the English primary auxiliary verbs perform, it shows that they are as important as lexical verbs in our communication. Thus any misuse or omission of this type of auxiliary verbs in focus leads to distortion in the message meant to be related to our listeners. It is interesting to note that correct use of the English primary auxiliary verbs makes our communication to be error-free so as to convey meaningful information to our listeners.

This is why palmer (1965:12) mentions that “language as a means of communication among people has a sensitive aspect which is the verb.” According to him, learning to speak or write correctly and meaningfully is like trying to operate the verbal forms of the language involved. This means that if we are conscious of the fact that the verbal forms contain the words that carry the message in our sentences, we would not misuse the verbal forms. Based on this fact, we can say that the verbal forms in any Language are the life-wire of any message meant to be communicated. Therefore, should there be any misuse of the verbal forms, particularly the English primary auxiliary verbs, the message, which has any of them, is considered somewhat distorted. This is why the emphasis in this paper focuses on the fact that these closed systems of verbal forms (the English primary auxiliary verbs) which take the positions of lexical verbs in some sentences have to be applied correctly.

The present study is one that uses a linguistic approach to make a careful study of the use of the English primary auxiliary verbs among the Nigerian speakers of English. The finding in this paper would serve as complement to many studies that have been carried out on the use of English among numerous speakers.

Review of English Primary Auxiliary Verbs by Some Grammarians

Oluwole and Rose (1996), Quirk, et al (1972, 1985), Young (1980) and Bamgbose (1990) among others, all have similar opinion on the English

primary auxiliary verbs. They opine that this type of auxiliary verbs is such that contain words that are used along with the main verbs to make up a verbal group in a given clause. According to them, the fact that they co-occur in a verbal group in a sentence is what earns them the name “helping verbs” Each of these grammarians identified ‘Be’ ‘Have’ and ‘Do’ as the English primary auxiliary verbs which function both as auxiliaries and lexical verbs. For example,

---Ann is Learnig English.

---They had two children (Quirk et al, 1985: 129 and Oluwole and Rose, 1996: 157).

With regard to their argument the first sentence shows the English primary auxiliary verb ‘is’ being used as helping verb while in the second sentence ‘had’ is being used as lexical verb. Similarly, Stageberg (1981) opines that the English primary auxiliary verbs are always closely associated with the main verb. However, in his own opinion, the English primary auxiliary verbs are divided into two: primary auxiliaries ‘Be’ and ‘Have’ and periphrastic auxiliary ‘Do’. In his explanation why he separated auxiliary ‘Do’ from auxiliaries ‘Be’ and ‘Have’ and why he called it periphrastic auxiliary ‘Do’, that it is meant to show how periphrastic auxiliary ‘Do’ could be used to replace an inflected form of verb. For example,

---- It does work, for it works. (Stageberg, 1981: 125)

In this sentence, inflected form of verb, ‘works’ replaces the periphrastic auxiliary ‘Do’.

Sledd (1959) refers to the English primary auxiliary verbs ‘Be’, ‘Have’ and ‘Do’ as three basic non-modal auxiliaries. He opined that they always serve the purpose of helping the verb to form a verb phrase. He pointed out that the non-modal auxiliaries (the English primary auxiliaries) have different forms that can be grouped into present, past and past participle tenses. For example,

Present tense	Fast tense	Past participle tense
am	was	-----
is	was	-----
are	were	-----
has	had	had
have	had	had
do	did	done
does	did	done

Muir (1972) describes the English primary auxiliary verbs as elements of structure which may precede the lexical element in any construction. He identified the English primary auxiliary verbs as 'Be', 'Have' and 'Do' which he called non-modal auxiliaries. According to him, the morphology of auxiliary verbs differs from that of lexical verbs such that the auxiliary verbs in focus (Be, Have, Do) have either more or less forms than the lexical verbs.

Muir discussed four main criteria by which the English primary auxiliary verbs are classified. They include: Negation, Inversion, Substitution, and Marked positive element. He illustrated these in the following sentences:

- I am not coming. (Negation)
- Is the boy coming? (Inversion)
- I scored and so did John. (Substitution)
- He did it the boy. (Marked positive)

(Muir, 1972: 45)

Reid (1991) discussed the English primary auxiliary verb 'Do' as a verb that is used to show emphasis, to ask questions and to make denials in our sentences. He illustrated these in the following sentences:

- The boy's do play soccer. (Emphasis)
- Do the boys play soccer? (Interrogation)
- The boys do not play soccer. (Making denials)

(Reid, 1991:18)

Paul and Arthur (1969) describe the English primary auxiliary verbs as words that occur with verbs to form verbal groups or verbal phrases. Instead of classifying the English primary auxiliary verbs as other authors have done, they decided to subgroup them according to the form of verb with which it occurs. Through this method of classification, they reveal the English primary auxiliary verbs and their various uses. For examples;

- (a) Primary auxiliary 'Do' used with the base form of the verb often called the 'plain infinitive'. E.g. The man does/did remember the boy.
- (b) Primary auxiliary verb 'Be' used with the '-ing' form of verb. E.g. I am/was going.
- (c) Primary auxiliary verb 'Have' used with the past participle of main verb. E.g. He has/had gone.
(Paul and Arthur, 1969:78)

Based on these opinions from the grammarians, the English primary auxiliary verbs are a type of auxiliary verbs in English which are considered to be sensitive words that the speakers of English cannot ignore, but be used along with the lexical words so that accurate sentences can be made. In other words, because the English primary auxiliary verbs are so important in our communication, speakers must consider the various ways thus type of auxiliary verbs can be grammatically used in sentences.

Traditional Grammar Approach to the Use of English Auxiliaries

Greenbaum (1988) defines grammar as a general theory of language description. In this sense, grammar refers to the properties processes that underlie the use of language. This means that speakers are expected to be equipped with the knowledge of the rules of the language they intend to speak and to apply such rules accurately when using them.

Traditional grammar precedes what is now known as scientific approach to the study of language. Its approach is one that is normative, definition oriented, and prescriptive in nature. It represents an attempt to prescribe rules for language use. It prescribes rather than merely describes language. Emphasis is on correct usage, that is, what speakers should say. Truly, it is this attitude to correctness of the traditional grammar that has made it to always prescribe what sort of language ought to be used. Such terms as nouns, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, object, subject, auxiliary verbs, e.t.c., are derived from traditional grammar and are used to analyze sentences today.

Take for instance, the traditional grammar would analyze the following sentence using the features mentioned above.

The students have done the assignment.

Subject

Predicate

In this sentence, the subject is the person being talked about while the predicate constitutes what is said about the person. The predicate is broken into the auxiliary verb (have), the main verb (done) and the object (the assignment).

Being what the traditional grammar is, it is interesting to note that traces of these grammatical terms or features are still being used in most of our school today. However, the traditional grammar, which is normative, perspective, and definition –oriented has provided us with clear explanation on the general uses of the English auxiliary verbs.

Problem with the Use of English Primary Auxiliary Verb

There is no doubt that speakers of the English language today commit grammatical errors of different kinds when communication takes place among them. The wrong use of English primary auxiliary verbs is said to be prominent. When we take into consideration the way speakers use the said Auxiliary verbs in their sentences, it shows that they do not understand the principles guiding the use of the English primary auxiliary verbs. Thus, each time they speak, they misapply the function of each of the said auxiliaries. In fact, this has spread us to investigate on the use of the English primary auxiliary verbs among speakers of English so as to improve the proficiency of the Nigerian speakers of English language.

Underneath are sample sentences showing the misuse of the English primary auxiliary verbs by numerous speakers of English.

1. This set of plates are very costly.
2. The poor man together with his children do go to church regularly.
3. Either the producer or the sponsors does the work.
4. At first before this marriage was approved, both parents must agree.
5. But if she don't turn you down, you could let her know you too.
6. Neither Sani nor Hassan have completed the course work.
7. A scholar and statesmen is what he strives to become.
8. He spent more time preparing himself then she does.
9. None of the students have come yet.
10. Almost everybody in our house don't like keeping dog.

11. That is, the father and mother has accepted and heard.
12. How is Hassan and Audu?
13. One of the girls don't understand English language.
14. The next day, I am posted to the section where I'm to work.
15. My duties is to receive and pay cash to the customers of the bank.

Discussion

From the sample sentences of numerous speakers of English, we deduce that they commit errors of different kinds whenever they make use of the English primary auxiliary verbs in their sentences. The errors show that they are insensitive of the principles guiding the use of the said auxiliary verbs whenever communication takes place among them.

The Nigerian speakers of English, most of the time, fail to understand the grammatical concord rule (plural noun should go with plural verb while singular noun should go with singular verb) in sentences they make. This could be as a result of inability to receive intensive teaching on the basics of English language. They sometimes fail to understand that 'is' and 'does' are used as singular verbs while 'do' and 'are' function as plural verbs. Thus in the context where they are expected to use singular primary auxiliary verb they make use of plural primary auxiliary verb instead, not minding whether the tense is correct or not. This a clear signal that they are not always conscious of the principles guiding the use of the English primary auxiliary verbs (be, have, do) whenever they communicate in English. This can be seen in the following sentences.

- This set of plates is very costly. Our subjects used the wrong auxiliary verb instead of the correct one which is singular auxiliary 'is' since it is a set of plates that is the focus.
- The poor man, together with his children do go to church regally. They also used the wrong auxiliary verb in place of 'does' that is the correct auxiliary since the emphasis is placed on the poor man in the expression.
- Either the producer or the sponsors does the work. The auxiliary verb, 'does' was used by our subject instead of 'do' which is the correct verb since the concord's law of proximity says the verb must agree with the subject that is close to it.
- At first before this marriage was approved, both parents must agree. Auxiliary 'was' has been used wrongly by our subjects against

- auxiliary verb 'is' which would have been used since the tense is present.
- But if she don't turn you down, you could let her know you too. The correct auxiliary verb, 'does' is expected to be used since the subject is singular. Except if the subject is plural that the verb 'do' can match.
 - Neither Sani nor Hassan have completed the course work. Again auxiliary verb, 'have' is inappropriate in this expression since our focus is on neither of the two subjects. So, auxiliary 'has' is the appropriate type.
 - A scholar and statesmen is what he strives to become. Here our subjects 'is' wrongly to refer to two qualities instead of auxiliary 'are' which is the appropriate type that matches with the two qualities mentioned in the expression.
 - He spent more time preparing himself than she does.

In this expression the auxiliary 'did' is the appropriate option since the past tense verb, 'spent' has been used at the beginning showing past action.

- None of the students have come yet.

Auxiliary verb 'has' will be appropriate in this expression since it is one out of many subjects that is the focus. So, 'have' is incorrect.

- Almost everybody in our house don't like keeping dog. Auxiliary verbs, 'do' is inappropriate here since the quantifier, everybody refers to singular person. Thus auxiliary 'doesn't' will be appropriate.
- That is, the father and mother has accepted and heard. The correct auxiliary verbs, 'have' is expected to have been used by our subjects since the subjects are two . Hence 'has' is not correct.
- How is Hassan and Audu?

The expression is talking about two persons, and 'is' will be inappropriate; rather, auxiliary 'are' is the appropriate type.

- One of the girls don't understand English language. The auxiliary verb 'do' is incorrect in this expression. This is because the focus is on one out of many subjects hence 'does' is the appropriate auxiliary verb..

- The next day, I am posted to the section where I'm to work. Our subjects misused auxiliary verbs, 'am' in this expression. This is because the action reported had passed. So, auxiliary 'was' is rather appropriate here
- My duties are to receive and pay cash to the customers of the bank. Because duties is a plural word, the correct auxiliary verb is are so is has been wrongly applied.

Conclusion

Based on the above discussion on the sample sentences of speakers of English language in Nigeria, we could draw an inference that the English primary auxiliary verbs are problematic to numerous Nigerian speakers of English. Therefore we are of the opinion that most speakers lack adequate exposure to language use and probably poor teaching background could have contributed to the problems they still exhibit when making use of the said English auxiliary verbs.

Even though it is true that both speakers and English language teachers cannot be perfect like the native, efforts should still be made to strife for the Standard English because it is what is obtainable in our educational system.

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