An Error Analysis
Of the Writing of Tanzanian University Students

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Abstract

This paper examines the general patterns of errors made by university students in their essays. The study involved a group of first year students from the University of Dar as Salaam, who wrote essays about their linguistic backgrounds. The errors made by the students were then classified into a number of classes. The results indicate that the highest per cents of errors were in the over-elaboration, verbal and nominal classes. Specifically, a good number of students made many errors relating to over-elaboration, which is caused by over-emphasis on formal structure in the teaching of English. The paper recommends that error analysis studies pay attention to both the structure of the language and the discussion of language functions and the context within which the text to be analysed is produced.

Keywords: *error analysis, essay writing, Tanzanian university students*

Introduction

During the course of a study on the relationship between English Language performance and first year academic success at the University of Dar es Salaam (see Occasional Paper no. 1), an error analysis was carried out on the writing of some first year students. A group of students had written about 'Mylinguistic Background' either as a linguistics assignment or at my special request. At first, I had hoped to develop an individual ' error index' to see if this is related to academic success but a look at the following passage from one essay will give some idea why this plan was dropped and I switched to looking at the general patterns of mistakes made by the whole group.

'The coast neighborhood where I was born speak entirely the Swahili language and I am therefore accustomed to speaking and writing this language. The writing of Swahili which my people understood is by using Arabic alphabetic numerals but to be understandable in Swahili.'

The first obvious mistake is with the word 'speak' – there should be an 's' at the end because it is related to the third person singular noun 'the coast

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neighbourhood'. Perhaps neighbourhoods should not really speak? Maybe the mistake is in leaving the people out of the neighbourhood, in which case speak would be correct. Anyhow, what about the use of 'coast' as the adjective in front of neighbourhood? Should it really be 'coastal' or is coast just an unlikely alternative? In many cases the noun form is preferable, e.g. fire engine/incendiary engine. The expression 'almost entirely' seems wrong and could be replaced by 'almost only' but is that really an improvement? Is the mistake a question of the relationship between 'almost' and 'entirely' or between 'entirely' and the non-gradable verb 'speak' or again between 'entirely' and the complement 'the Swahili language'? Would it not be better to replace 'this language' by 'it'? In the next sentence the verb 'understood' is problematic. Does it refer to the present or to some earlier historical period? At least, 'are' is clearly mistaken; it should agree with 'the writing', which is third person singular. Is something missing after 'are'? Perhaps 'done' so that the sentence reads 'The writing of Swahili…is done by using…' What on earth are 'Arabic alphabetic numerals'? Presumably the word which should have been used is 'script', i.e. 'the Arabic script'. The final phrase 'to be readable in Swahili' is difficult to disentangle grammatically but the meaning is relatively clear (to someone who knows about the relationship between Arabic and Swahili). What, then, is the number of mistakes in the two sentences quoted? In working out an individual error index, how the different mistakes should be weighted is a problem. It is clear that some errors will have little or no effect on the understandability of the passage, while others will be extremely important.

Amongst linguists and teachers, there has been a wide ranging discussion of problems arising from acceptability and correctness(e.g. Quirk, 1968; Philip,1968).

Of categories which could be applied to the problem of labeling mistakes, one set for lexical items (vocabulary) is congruous, obscure or incoherent, the other set for grammatical rules is established, divided, ill-established, dubious and unacceptable. However, he makes it perfectly clear that these categories could only be applied with reference to some community of speakers or users of a language. In looking at the language written by Tanzanian students it is precisely this which is uncertain. What are the norms or models which should be used in judging whether something is incorrect or inappropriate? Perhaps a standard East African English is emerging. Spencer (1971:21) discusses this in relation to West African English and refers to 'a penumbral area in which semantic, grammatical or collocational "errors", either through false analogy within English or transference from the mother tongue, gradually become entrenched and widely used. It is never easy to tell when this kind of structural shift or extension has taken firm root, and for how long it remains, or ought to be treated as remediable.'

Scheme of Analysis

The general scheme of analysis was based on a study carried out by Wyatt (1973) on the writing of Ugandan secondary school students. I intended to be relatively comprehensive. But as the details were worked out in relation to the specific texts being analyzed, it is possible that this might have led me to pay more attention to certain types of errors. In particular, I was concerned with finding those factors which might account for long T Unit Length (see note 1) and complexity of sentence structure. Given my own tendency to use light punctuation and my high tolerance of variations in spelling, these two factors might have been under-rated. In spite of these limitations, the following table of errors should provide some useful background to the previous chapter's quantitative analysis. The categories used are discussed below with examples.

Punctuation: Errors of Punctuation account for about 7.4% of all errors. They have been divided into cases where punctuation is missing (e.g. '…despite that I know' which should read '…despite that, I know…') or unnecessarily added(e.g. 'In case, there happened to be…', which should read 'In case there happened to be…') or word division is strange (e.g. 'A little bit detailed').

Spelling: Spelling Errors account for only 3.6% of the total. They have been divided into those where errors were to do with vowels (e.g. 'When I set for the (…) examination', which should be 'I sat for') and those with consonants (e.g. 'vocaburaly' for vocabulary). One of the basic problems for non-native speakers of English is the rather loose relationship between pronunciation and spelling which leads to errors such as 'precotious' for precocious. There are also mistakes made because of interference from previously learnt languages. Swahili has a five vowel systemas opposed to the English twenty vowel system (Abercrombie, 1964) and so Tanzanian students will frequently reduce a number of separate vowels in English to one single sound, e.g. both *set* and *sat* are pronounced *set*. Another example of this type of interference can be seen in the above 'vocaburaly', for among many speakers of Swahili /r/ and /l/ are not distinguished. The percentage given here is likely to be low because I did not count every instance of the same mistake, e.g. one person spelt vernacular as 'venecular' or 'vernecular' about twenty times but I only counted it twice.

Type of Error		No.	Sub-Total	Percent
Punctuation	Missing	27	43	7.4%
	Added	8		
	Word Division	8		
Spelling	Vowel	13	21	3.6%
	Consonant	8		

<u>Nominal Group</u>				
Articles (a, the, some, etc.)		43	87	14.9%
Intensification Comparison, etc.		36		
Adjective, Noun forms		7		
	Count/Non-count	1		
<u>Verbal Group</u>	Phrasal verbs and Catenatives	45	91	15.6%
	Tenas, Forms	33		
	Auxiliaries and Models	13		
	Dissimilar Forms Joined	8		
<u>Adverbial Group</u>				
	Adjective form for Adverb, etc.	13	19	3.3%
	Adverb Position	6		
<u>Prepositions</u>				
	After noun or adjective	26	45	7.7%
	Place, etc.	19		
<u>Sentence Structure</u>				
	Missing Nominal, Verbal Adverbial Group	26	69	11.8%
	Link Words	18		
	Pronouns		14	
	Concord (nominal- verbal)	8		
	Subordinate Clause as Sentence	3		
<u>Over-elaboration</u>	Set Phrases	66	117	20.1%
	Repetition of Nominal, Verbal and Adverbial Group	51		
<u>Confusions</u>	Inappropriate or mixed words, phrases and combinations	91	91	15.6%
	Grand Totals		**583**	**100.0%**

<u>Nominal Group:</u> Nominal Group Errors account for 14.9% of the total. They have been divided into four categories. Determiners (e.g. errors in the use of articles and other words such as some, every and these).An example of this was 'my first language I learnt', which should read 'the first language I learnt'. <u>Intensification</u>, <u>Comparison</u>, etc. This includes errors such as 'I could speak some little Sukuma' instead of 'a little' or 'some' and 'we were forbidden to speak nothing else but Swahili' instead of 'speak anything but Swahili' or even better 'anything other than Swahili'. <u>Adjective Noun forms,</u> e.g. 'Masterly' for 'mastery', Count/Non-Count e.g. 'lost interests in' for 'lost interest in'. Many of the mistakes in this group may be due to interference from Swahili. In Swahili there are no articles (a, the, etc.), adjectives do not have comparative forms and many nouns that are singular in English are plural in Swahili and vice versa.

Verbal Group: Verbal Group errors account for 15.6% of the total. They have been broken down into four categories; <u>Phrasal Verbs and Catenstives</u>, which includes the use of expressions such as 'cope up with' for 'cope with', 'resorted to cane' for 'resorted to caning' and 'I started by learning at looking at pictures' for 'I started to learn by looking at pictures' or 'I started by learning to look at pictures'; <u>Tense forms,</u> e.g. 'by this time we were been taught…' for 'at this time we were being taught'; <u>Auxiliaries and Models</u>, e.g. 'naturally therefore, my Swahili and English may be better than Kichagga' instead of '…Swahili and English may be better…' and the unnecessary use of the emphatic 'do'; <u>Dissimilar</u> forms joined. The reason for including the final category even though there are no examples of it in the sample is that there are a number of instances of it in other texts produced by students. An example of this is 'they neither read nor writing…' instead of 'they neither read nor write…' and it seems to be due to interference from Swahili.

Adverbial Group: Errors in this group account for only 3.3% of the total. They have been divided into two categories: <u>Adjective form for Adverb</u>, etc., e.g. 'bad' for 'badly' or 'oftenly' for 'often' and <u>Adverb position</u>, e.g. 'they laughed at me always' instead of 'the always laughed at me'. The second category of position is difficult to use because there is a very wide range of adverbs that can be used at the beginning, middle or end of a clause. A number of errors related to the adjunct group will show up in the set phrases section discussed later on so this might have kept the percentage rather low.

Prepositions: Errors in the use of prepositions account for 7.7% of the total. They have been broken down into two categories here: <u>After noun or adjective</u>, e.g., 'took the pride of addressing' for 'took pride in addressing' and <u>Place</u>, etc., e.g. 'came at home' instead of 'came home', 'while in holidays' instead of 'while on holiday'. Errors in the use of prepositions also come into the category discussed above, 'phrasal verbs and catenatives' and if errorswith prepositions were isolated as a single category no matter whether they are related to verbs, adjectives, nouns, etc. it might well be one of the biggest sources of obvious errors.

Sentence Structure: Errors in Sentence Structure account for 11.8% of the total. They have been divided into five categories. <u>Missing Nominal, Verbal or Adjunct Group,</u> e.g. '…this increased my vocabulary and was at least able to formulate sentences in…', which should contain 'I' as the subject of 'was…able to formulate'. This example shows the commonest type of this mistake when a single short item is missing but another example shows a much wider problem, that of making such a long list of nominals with relative clauses attached to them that at the end the main part of the basic sentence is left out,e.g. 'Not only my playmates who…but also other children who…and even my mothers relatives who could speak to me in Nyakyusa only.'

Link words: e.g. 'It is now four years ever since I learnt…' instead of 'since', or 'it was here when I started to learn…' instead of 'it was here that I started'. Pronouns which cover a number of different types of errors in the use of pronouns. One of these is when an unnecessary pronoun is added, e.g. 'Father and mother now they had to learn…' This may be caused by interference from Swahili where a subject prefix is always placed before the verb stem even if the subjects have been specified (e.g. Baba na Mama wanakuja). Another is when the pronoun changes in number or person, e.g. from 'one' to 'we' to 'you' or as follows: '…who were very good at languages, both at speaking or writing it. 'There are other examples which are more difficult to classify, e.g. 'When I was six it was the first time I…' Concord between subject and verb, e.g. 'The writing of Swahili…are by…' The number of these mistakes seems unusually low. In an Education essay (see Occ. Paper no. 1), this lack of agreement between subject and verb was the most obvious single error; perhaps because it was mainly in the Present Simple about a single person. Subordinate Clause as Sentence, e.g. 'But that I did not learn other languages which I very much wished to learn and they are of international repute.' Possibly this might have fitted into the category Missing Nominal, Verbal or Adjunct Group but it is difficult to know what was left out and where. The errors grouped together in this section might have been divided into errors in clause, T Unit and Sentence structure, but as some of the errors could not be easily categorized this seemed unnecessary.

Over-Elaboration: Errors in this group account for 20.1% of the total. They have been divided into two categories. Set Phrases: This includes a wide variety of padding which adds to the length of sentences and T Units but adds little meaning, especially expressions using 'fact' such as 'In fact it was,' 'despite the fact that', etc. A rather more complex example can also be given 'On the whole to conclude my linguistic background I am bound to say that… (and a line later) so this is to say that'. One particular expression which was noticeable because it is so seldom used by native speakers is 'each and every'. This category is very difficult to define in a very clear way because a certain amount of redundancy is necessary in any form of writing or speaking and different people will have markedly different criteria for what is acceptable. Repetition of Nominal, Verbal or Adjunct Group: This includes the unnecessary repetition of particular elements in a sentence or T Unit such as the repetition of 'in Swahili' in the following sentence, 'There I learned to pray in Swahili, sing some songs in Swahili, etc.' This could easily have been written as follows, 'There I learned to pray, sing songs, etc. in Swahili.' Another example should make it clear how this repetition can lead to virtual nonsense. 'This condition of the Ngoni language is indicative of the inherent difficulty in language development in language.' If I read the sentence correctly it could be rewritten as follows, 'These problems of Ngoni make it a difficult language to learn.' Once again this category might be nearly impossible to define strictly. Compression of the various parts of a sentence by use of pronouns, positioning, etc. can lead to greater ambiguity; therefore a certain amount of repetition can be useful.

<u>Confusion,</u> etc.: This category accounts for 15.6% of all the errors and could be seen as a general category to cover all the cases which do not clearly fit into any of the above categories. This group includes a number of what might be called 'East Africanisms' such as 'I could hear the language' meaning 'I could understand the language', 'academicians' for 'academics' ('academics' being used on the model of 'linguistics', 'physics', etc. to mean anything to do with academic subjects), 'I was chanced entry' meaning something like 'I was lucky to enter', etc. It also includes some expressions which are much more interesting than standard usage such as 'After four years had collapsed', 'before the onset of Europeans into East Africa'. Other examples from the Education essays are also interesting, some children were 'hooliganic' or 'naughtorious', some others 'were out to floric'.

From the above notes on the categories used, some of the limitations of the analysis should be obvious. The proportion of some of the errors depends directly on the actual subject of the text. For example, mistakes involving the Simple Present will only show themselves clearly if the present tense is used extensively in the text and mistakes involving concord of the third person singular and the verb will only occur regularly in the writing if it is about individual person or objects. These two factors account for the low proportion of concord mistakes in the essays analyzed but if the Education essays had been examined instead the proportion would have been much higher. Other factors, while not having quite such specific effects, are likely to have influenced the results: for example, the group of students whose essays were analyzed were in most cases not specializing in Linguistics and English and the majority of them had written the essays voluntarily and knew that the person who would be reading them was doing some research on language use. The analysis was not in any way exhaustive because many of the errors would have to be cross-classified at different levels before a full picture of the mistakes being made would emerge. For example, the missing 's' from the end of a verb in the Simple Present could be treated on the level of both word and clause rank. However, the main point of the analysis was to bring into focus some of the more common mistakes made in the writing of students at the university level.

Comparisons
Provided the above limitations are remembered, an interesting comparison can be made with the study by Wyatt (1973). He was working in Uganda and took a sample of exercise books written by secondary school students in the year before they took the EACE (School Certificate) examination. There are differences in the educational systems in Uganda and Tanzania, which are growing wider each year, but they still have certain features in common. The two systems both grew out of a similar colonial model often dominated by mission schools. The majority of students in both countries come from a Bantu

linguistic background, English is the second or third language they learn and it is the medium of instruction and examination at the secondary and university level. The criteria I used for the classification of mistakes might have shifted from those originally suggested by Wyatt but should still be close enough to allow some comparison.

Error Analysis – Secondary/University

	Wyatt	Andersen
Punctuation	7.8%	7.4%
Spelling	18.4%	3.6%
Nominal Group	16.2%	14.9%
Verbal Group	15.2%	15.6%
Sentence Structure	16.6%	11.8%
Prepositions	4.1%	7.7%
Repetition, Circumlocution etc.	3.7%	20.1%
Other Categories	18.8%	8.9%

The percentages for Punctuation, Nominal and Verbal Groups are very similar and this suggests that mistakes in these areas may be fairly constant after a few years of learning English. The difference between the percentages of spelling mistakes suggests that thisis an improvement over time with more contact with the written word. Sentence structure mistakes are lower in this study but not big enough to warrant any conclusions to be drawn about the ability to handle this level of language. The difference in mistakes with prepositions might be due to differences in the way they were isolated and classified. The biggest difference between the two studies shows itself in the category of Repetitions and Circumlocutions and even allowing differences in analysis needs to be explained. Perhaps students at the higher levels feel more of a necessity to maintain a particular length of sentence. Using percentages can clearly produce difficulties in interpreting these results because the total number of mistakes made per unit length of text might be very much higher in Wyatt's study. In general, however, it seems as if there are some differences in the types of errors made at secondary school and university level. At the secondary school level there is a much higher proportion of spelling mistakes being made and at the university level a higher proportion of unnecessary repetitions and circumlocutions. It is possible that secondary school students are writing generally at a much simpler level and that the mistakes of over complexity at the university level are related to the students trying to write in an 'overs laborite' style.

Other studies of error analysis are often not so useful for comparison because of the great difference both in the samples looked at and the categories of errors used. Some of these studies do however suggest possible sources of the

errors and it is worth seeing if these explanations account for at least a proportion of the errors made by Tanzanian students. Richards (1971) in a review of studies carried out on the native speakers of a number of different languages found that, in learning English, interference from the mother tongue was less important than intralingual interference from English. Interference from mother tongues and other language already learnt is most marked at the phonological level. Intra-language interference (i.e. from within English) could be broken down into various types such as overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules and false concepts. If we look back at the notes on the categories of errors used above we can find examples of most of the kinds of systematic errors mentioned by Richards. Interference from Swahili can be seen in many of the spelling errors, and mistakes made with the use of personal pronouns. Intralingual interference can be seen in the over-use of the emphatic 'do' and the use of expressions like 'suggest me' on the model of 'show me'. Richards suggested that many of the intralingual errors are caused by faulty teaching methods, such as pattern drills and exercises based on contrasts. Too much attention has been paid to teaching methods and not enough to learning strategies. The learning of a language by students may be in spite of rather than because of the teaching given which is frequently based on the mechanical learning of small parts of a language. A learner slowly builds up his own rules for the use of a language, whether he is an adult or a child.

Explanations based on inter-and intra-language interference can account for many of the errors found in the essays but they do not seem capable of handling the major problem of over-elaboration. It seems unlikely that interference from Swahili or any other language can account for the failure to delete unnecessary repetitions of clause elements or for the use of set phrases. These features of the writing of Tanzanian students can be looked at in a number of ways on the syntactic level (e.g. using transformational grammar the problem could be described as a failure to learn deletion rules) or in terms of a more general functional model.

Towards a more Functional Analysis

Halliday (1970, 1973) has presented a model which could be of use here. He distinguishes between three main functions of language: ideational, which 'serves for the expression of…the speaker's experience of the real world, including the inner world of his own consciousness', interpersonal, which 'serves to establish and maintain social relations', and textual, which 'enables the speaker or writer to construct "texts", or connected passages of discourse that is situationally relevant… One aspect of the textual function is the establishment of cohesive relations from one sentence to another in a discourse (Halliday, 1970:143). Much of what has been called 'over-elaboration' in the writing of the

Tanzanian students can be discussed in relation to 'Cohesion' (Halliday& Hassan, 1973). Cohesion is concerned with the links, other than purely grammatical ones, within and between sentences and is shown through reference, substitution, ellipsis and various conjunctive and lexical relationships.

The best way to illustrate the problem is to look at some examples and to see what might have been done to simplify the text by the use of other cohesive relationships. 'I regard both Swahili and English as new languages which I began to learn when I entered school. Of these two languages Swahili and English, Swahili is my second language and English my third language in order of learning and fluency.' Lexical cohesion is sometimes achieved by the repetition of particular items, such as 'language' in the passage above, but, in this instance, the use of ellipsis would have made the passage simpler and possibly clearer. I will re-write the two sentences above and then comment on the various cohesive relationships involved. 'I regard both Swahili and English as new languages, which I began to learn at school. Of these two, Swahili is my second language in order of both learning and fluency while English is my third.' The use of 'these' at the beginning of the second sentence refers back to 'Swahili and English', therefore it is not necessary to add 'languages' and certainly not 'Swahili and English'. 'In order of learning and fluency' is related to 'second' and should, therefore, follow it as closely as possible and then it is simpler to leave out 'language' after 'my third'. Lexical cohesion is given not only by repetition but also by synonyms and other related items. In the original version there are three words: 'new', 'began' and 'entered' and they produce a rather exaggerated emphasis on this 'newness'. The change from 'when I entered school' to 'at school' does not seem to miss out very much. Finally, the use of 'while' in place of 'and' in the final section changes the conjunctive relation between 'my second' and 'my third language'. I feel that in this instance the meaning is strengthened by a link word implying contrast.

In writing, explicitness is important because very little reference can be made to non-linguistic features of the situation. Everything must be carried in the text and reference must be to other sections of the text not to any outside objects or persons unless it is absolutely clear that both the writer and the reader share the same background experience (e.g. 'You remember the other day…' as in a letter). However, the over-explicitness of some of the writing can become difficult to follow by its constant repetition. Problems with reference and cohesion occurred not only in the essays examined for errors, so I will add some examples taken from other texts.

In one of the Education essays of a girl who did generally poorly, I found the following case of over-explicitness: 'The mother is about 34 and the father, 38 is only four years older than the mother but the grandmother whose husband is dead is about 66 years old although she can walk in and out of the home for a walk with the grandchildren.' The second half of the sentence is not quite as

redundant as the first but there appear to be problems with the linking of all details about the grandmother in the one T Unit. In drawing together a number of simpler sentences into a complex one there is always some danger that information will be lost and that there will be ambiguity of reference. This kind of problem can be seen in an example from a Botany write-up: 'This height method of measuring growth in the light is not the best because it does not take into account the other concepts of growth in thickness as well as extensive branching or leaf formation. In the dark it is apparently applicable but it is faulty because it just incorporates cellular elongation, etiolation may be increase mineral content from much water uptake (therefore a big fresh weight result) but gives no enough evidence as to any organic matter increase (growth) since it is only chlorophyll (absent in plants grown in the dark) that can carry out this organic synthesis.' Sentence one here is 36 words long and sentence two is 62 words; fortunately the second sentence is a fairly extreme example. One of the problems is associated with the extensive use of the pronoun 'it'.

The use of set phrases needs to be examined in terms of the interpersonal function, which is realized in a number of grammatical choices. At the clause level there are choices between 'Imperative', 'Declarative' and 'Interrogative'; this can be seen in the choice of styles in the Botany write-ups. Again, at the clause level, there are choices of modality, i.e. modal auxiliaries such as 'should', 'can' and 'may'; this is shown in phrases such as 'I should think' and 'We may conclude'. Within the verbal group there are choices of person, i.e. 'I', 'We', 'You', 'He/She/It' and 'They'. This relates to some of the differences between the Linguistic essays and the others. In the nominal and adverbial groups there are choices between a variety of words related to attitude and comment. At the level of lexis, we have the choice between stylistic variants of a word.

Most of the set phrases can be described in terms of the above choices and they convey something about the relationship between the writer and the reader. Expressions such as 'I should think' and 'I tend to feel that' reflect a posture of individuality and hesitation or tentativeness which is frequently a feature of academic writing. Some of the other expressions, especially those using 'the fact' as their base, e.g. 'the fact of the matter is that', are used to convey the weight of some external, but unspecified, authority which is another all too frequent feature of academic writing. This kind of verbose style often hides more than it reveals and is unfortunately readily picked up from textbooks and lectures. An example of this kind of writing is seen in one of the Botany write-ups, 'Another problem which though not seen in the experiment as the plants never completed their growth – but can still be pointed out is the fact that – the dry weight may be misleading …' This is more related to the social function of displaying academic position rather than to the function of thinking and writing clearly.

Another element of the over-elaborated style is the use of lexical items which have not been fully understood. An extreme example of this is the use of 'initial' in the following sentence, 'The dry weight is initial in the beginning'. Words like this are often heard in lectures and seen in textbooks but they are very seldom explained. There is a very definite problem related to the use of specialized vocabulary within most academic disciplines. There are often competing 'schools' within a discipline that use certain terms in different ways and this can be highly confusing for someone who is just beginning to work in a particular field. People learning a subject are keen to use a new word in as wide a context as possible and this can lead to some uneasiness on the part of the professionals. An example is the use of the term 'environment' in the following sentence, 'In the learning of Swahili I had many difficulties from the local environment.' 'Environment' seems a strange word to use to refer to the attitudes of people who lived in the area. Technical vocabulary is required for many purposes and it is difficult to isolate the ideational from the interpersonal functions. Much of what is called technical language could be expressed with simpler terms. Many of the mistakes called 'Confusions' occurred when students were attempting to use technical terms.

If we return to certain grammatical features of the writing about different subjects we could again find it difficult to isolate the ideational functions from the interpersonal or even textual functions. The three different functions cannot be sharply divided,off from each other and only a close analysis of the writing will reveal which function is predominant in any particular text. For instance, the use of passives and nominalization in much academic writing is not purely ideational (i.e. experiential and logical) but also has an interpersonal function. It would be very difficult to decide when it was necessary to use a particular grammatical structure and when the alternative forms were in free variation. The implications of the difference between saying 'Heat the water to a temperature of 100 degrees' and 'The water was heated to a temperature of 100 degrees' in the write-up of an experiment are difficult to gauge, especially if the prior activity of doing an experiment is the same in both cases.

Conclusions

The results of this error analysis are best understood in the light of the main study of the relationship between English language performance and first year academic success. Essays written by Education students as part of their normal courses were collected and analysed in terms of certain measures of length and grammatical complexity. The Tanzanian students produced written English which was similar to that of native speakers at the same educational level in terms of the length and complexity measures. They were able to switch styles of writing to match the assignments given and there were signs that those who could switch more sharply did better generally. Significant correlations were found between the length and complexity

measures and first year performance; those students who wrote more simply tended to do better. The students who did less well produced what I have called an over-elaborate style.

The error analysis was based on essays written by students about their own linguistic background whereas the correlations mentioned above were based on an Education essay. Therefore, care must be taken in drawing conclusions about the relationship between errors and academic performance. However, the error analysis does seem to be able to provide some explanation for certain features of the over-elaborate style. The use of set phrases and the unnecessary repetition of clausal and group elements would lead to longer and more complex sentences and clauses. This style might affect academic performance because the writing will tend to be more longwinded and confused. The negative effects of the style are likely to be strongest when an assignment demands a simple descriptive approach.

Language is the product not only of the immediate situation but also the previous experience of the person using the language. One of the ways in which the over-elaborate style might have developed is through rote learning at earlier stages in the students' academic careers. Language teaching based on behaviourist assumptions of habit formation will tend to be very repetitive and mechanical. Many language teaching drills concentrate purely on the formal structure of language and ignore the functional aspect. The over-elaborate style seems to have been functional at least at certain levels; most of those who produced it did well at the school Certificate level. Given the educational system that the students passed through it is clear that generally rote learning would be useful. In a situation where the medium of instruction is a second or third language it is likely that much of the material presented at school was not fully understood. In the face of examinations rote learning provides some kind of answer. In an authoritarian educational system where discussion is not encouraged students will necessarily learn a very formal variety of English and the ruthless selection built into the educational system will encourage this tendency.

Language not only has ideational functions it also has an interpersonal function. It is possible that another reason why an over-elaborate style is developed is that it acts as a display of social position. Within Tanzania the use of English is largely restricted to the educated elite and, to show status amongst those who use English, over-elaboration might be useful. The textual function will also be affected by over-elaboration. Long-windedness is likely to lead to problems with cohesion and intratextual reference. There is likely to be another problem associated with extra textural reference. When language is learnt by rote the relationship between the language and the situation is likely to be weak.

It is regularly reported that students at the University of Dar es Salaam have problems with expressing themselves in written English. This shows up in external examiners reports (see Omari, 1975) and in discussions amongst members of staff and students. I hope that the above error analysis has made a start on some of the problems. Unfortunately error analysis normally only looks at problems related to the structure of the language and leaves aside any discussion of the functions. Another general problem with most analyses of errors is that they do not take sufficient account of the context within which the text to be analysed is produced. The subject matter of the text, the relationship between the participants and many other factors will affect the type of errors made. In conclusion, I would like to suggest that the problems of language learning and use which non-native speakers face will be best understood by an approach that takes into account the functional and semantic aspects of language as well as the more obvious structural aspects.

Note 1. The term T Unit is taken from the work of Hunt (1965) and it is an abbreviation of the term 'minimal terminable unit' which Hunt defines as: 'one main clause plus the subordinate clauses attached to or embedded in it.' This was introduced to break up sentences which are made extremely long by the use of link words like 'and' or 'but'.

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