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A GRAMMATICAL ASSESSMENT OF  
PREACHERS' APPLICATION OF ENGLISH  
CONCORD

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**Abstract**

*The observation of concord rules poses one of the greatest grammatical challenges in the use of English as a second language (L<sub>2</sub>) in Nigeria owing to the non-existence of the phenomenon in most Nigerian languages. This study investigates the degree of competence*

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*exhibited by Pastors in the application of English grammatical concord. The need for the work is underscored by the crucial roles played by the English language in Nigeria and also in consideration of the fact that Pastors interact with an appreciable percentage of Nigerians and can influence their learning of the English language either negatively or positively. The findings of the study are thus germane to English language learning and pedagogy. The primary data for the study were garnered from spontaneous sermons delivered by eight pastors in Awka metropolis. The errors noticed are categorized according to the different types of concord. The analysis reveals that the Pastors have poor mastery of the rules of concord. The causes of the concord errors in the data are more intralingual than interlingual. The implications of the findings for the learning of English as a second language are discussed and suggestions for improvement made.*

### **Introduction**

Nigeria, a multilingual country, can boast of more than four hundred languages. These languages are spoken by different ethnic groups that make up the country. Consequently, there is need for a common language that would adequately meet the communicative needs of the diverse people. The English language, though a colonial legacy, is officially adopted to fulfill this need. Hence, the language plays a pivotal role in the affairs of the country in dual capacity as the official and second language. In fact, a very high premium is placed on the English language for the survival of Nigeria as a nation. The language is used in politics, government administration, law, mass media, education and religion. One is greatly admired and respected if one writes and speaks English impeccably and fluently. Many Nigerians, therefore, strive to speak English in formal, informal and social contexts.

Regrettably, communication in English poses a big challenge to many Nigerians. This is usually attributed to poor learning, learning by analogy, carelessness or inadequate exposure to the intricacies of the grammar of the language as well as faulty application of grammatical

rules. The aforementioned negative factors generate errors in the use of the language.

Errors are deviations or derailment from the norms of a language. French in Aiyewumi, Agamah and Oloruike explains that errors are not evidence of carelessness or unwillingness but of growing pains and desire to learn (7). Corder believes that learners' errors are of particular importance because the making of errors can be regarded as a device that learners use in order to learn (Aiyewumi, Agamah and Oloruike 8). Headbloom in Ubahakwe defines errors as 'a systematic deviation from the target language by a non-native speaker(s) (27). He explains that a learner's error exhibits his incompetence in a particular aspect of language. He further distinguishes errors from mistakes. Mistakes could be caused by slip of the tongue, oversight in writing, distractions and so on. Mistakes could easily be corrected by the person who made them, but a person who has committed an error is incapable of correcting it unless he is taught the correct form. Krashen, however, believes that errors must occur before correct grammar rules are completely internalized (66). Errors are therefore facilitative rather than inhibitory in the language learning process.

Errors could be interlingual or intralingual in nature. Interlingual errors are caused by analogy with the native language while intralingua errors imply general characteristics of rule learning such as over generalization or faulty application of rules and conditions (Ubahakwe 32).

The knowledge of the rules of concord in English grammar is very necessary if one is to speak and write good English. Ill-formed sentences either irritate the linguistic wary or corrupt the English language acquired by learners of English. A lucid and convincing piece of writing as a matter of necessity must be grammatical for complete acceptability of such writing as a standard form. 'To develop the needed competence and to ensure a high level of performance, one has to internalize the structure of the language to the point of automaticity' (Ubahakwe 46).

In Nigeria, pastors are at the forefront of making regular use of the English language in their sermons. The sermons, (spontaneous or recorded) often enjoy high patronage from the citizenry. Suffice it to say that one of the best ways of learning a language is through regular interaction with the target language. However, when a congregation which is usually made up of people from different walks of life is in regular contact with sermons given by pastors who are not conversant with the rules of concord, the danger of corrupting the good English that has already been acquired by such a congregation is quite obvious. Young members of such a group run a greater risk.

The questions, therefore, are: how linguistic wary are Nigerian preachers in the use of English, since their preaching could go beyond religion and have either a positive or negative influence on the English language acquisition of their listening audience? How conversant are they with the rules of concord? This study sets out to answer these questions.

### **Concord in English Grammar: An Overview**

Grammar in its simplest sense is ‘the study of how a language works’ (Chairperson 151). Every language has its own grammar which is guided by certain rules. The rules of grammar derive from and encompass the various parts of speech that constitute the elements of a sentence. These parts of speech are not arranged haphazardly. Their occurrence and positions in a sentence must be guided by the syntax of the language. A particular part of speech must be in agreement with another part of speech for them to co-occur in a sentence. This is known as ‘concord’ in the English language. Quirk et al in Onuigbo defines concord as ‘a relationship between two grammatical elements such that if one of them selects a given feature, the other has to have the same feature (96). For instance, a singular subject must select a singular verb while a plural subject selects a plural verb as exemplified by the following sentences:

The girl loves her mother. (singular subject + singular verb)

The girls love their mother(s). (plural subject + plural verb)

Ogbazi summarizes the notion of concord in English grammar and states that it is the agreement between words in gender, number, case and person (127).

The following examples illustrate the definition:

The <u>girl</u> found <u>her</u> books.	} Gender
The <u>boy</u> found <u>his</u> books.	
The <u>shoe</u> <u>is</u> small.	} Number
The <u>shoes</u> <u>are</u> small.	
<u>Am</u> grateful.	} Person
<u>He</u> <u>is</u> grateful.	
<u>They</u> are grateful.	

Selection Restriction Rule, a popular view in Transformational Generative Grammar is a vital determinant in the choice and relationship between one grammatical element and the other. The salient point about the principle is that, for instance, an inanimate subject must agree with an inanimate verb. The following sentences, though grammatical, are unacceptable because they violate Selection Restriction Rule:

The chair sings. (inanimate + human).

The baby broke. (human + inanimate).

The rules of concord also take cognizance of the fact that there must be consistency in tense usage with regards to time reference. The sentence below is erroneous because of inconsistency in tense usage.

\*Ada came into the house, looks at the man and frowned (past + present + past).

The aforementioned rule notwithstanding Eka observes that there are no rules which forbid a sensible mixture of the past and present. The

emphasis is rather that, as much as sense and occasion demand, there should be consistency in time reference (184 – 185). Other patterns of concord are: Subject-complement concord, pronoun-antecedent concord, concord of person, subject-object concord, concord with correlatives, law of proximity and notional concord.

### **Causes of Concord Errors**

Concord incongruity constitutes one of the negative factors that contribute to the speaking of non-standard English. The study of non-standard English (non-std) as a variety of English is a valid socio-linguistic enterprise just as Standard English is (Akande 15). The study of non-standard syntactic features in Nigerian university graduates' English by Akande, and Opatá's similar investigation of English language error patterns of Nigerian University undergraduates expose the following as the linguistic errors committed by the subjects of their respective studies: 'Be' deletion, tense-related errors, absence of subject-verb concord, one of + singular noun, use of present participle for past participle, use of past form instead of past participle, literal translation, absence of different types of concord, ambiguity, wrong use of tenses, use of double contrastives and wrong pluralization of words. The list is not exhaustive. Akande observes that 'be' deletion, tense-related errors and absence of concord are the most common non-standard syntactic features in Nigerian graduates' English (15) while Opatá's study reveals that concord errors tops the list of grammatical errors identified in undergraduates' writing as it constitutes 55% of the aforementioned error patterns (66) .

Ozioko observes that errors of concord and tense are quite common on the pages of Nigerian newspapers. She states that errors of concord are particularly noticeable where the subject is widely separated from the verb (23). Oluikpe shares Ozioko's view and stresses that concord incongruity is the most common grammatical error that mars one's effort in writing effectively. He explains that errors in agreement or concord are caused by inconsistency in the use of:

- (i) number, as it involves subject and verb of a sentence;

(ii) pronoun and its antecedent

Person, in terms of:

- (i) Pronoun and its antecedent;
- (ii) shifts from one person to another;
- (iii) gender, as it relates to pronoun and its antecedent,
- (iv) tense, as it involves shifts from one tense to the other;
- (v) choice, as it applies to shifts from active to passive voice. (86)

Onuigbo explains that errors of grammatical concord can stem from inherent irregular patterns in the grammar of the English language. He makes special reference to nouns and observes that some language users find it difficult to associate the irregular nouns with the appropriate verb forms. Apart from the problem with the irregular nouns, greater difficulties may be experienced with nouns that end in plural markers even when they are used as singular nouns. 'Words such as alms, gallows, headquarters, and means will always select singular verb even though they end apparently in plural markers' (96).

The syntactic and lexical differences in a learner's first language and the English language could generate concord errors. Most Nigerian learners of English have acquired their first language to an appreciable degree before they are introduced to the English language. Consequently, the contact between the English language and their indigenous or first language has its implication. The sound system and grammar of the first language interfere with those of English. This usually leads to interlingual errors. In every English sentence, for instance, the verb must agree in number and person with its subject. This rule runs contrary to the syntax of Igbo. There is no lexical distinction between a singular and plural verb in the Igbo language as illustrated below:

	<b>Igbo</b>	<b>English</b>
<b>Singular:</b>	O na-abia	He is coming.
<b>Plural:</b>	Ha na-abia	They are coming.

They verbal element ‘na-abia’ goes with both singular and plural subjects. Therefore, there is no grammatical agreement between the subject and the verb. Again, there is no gender distinction between a masculine and feminine pronoun in Igbo language. “O na-abia” could mean ‘He is coming’ or ‘she is coming’. Other examples of discrepancies between the languages abound.

Faced with the above interlingual and intralingual challenges, a speaker of the English language needs to make conscious efforts in order to speak grammatically acceptable English.

### **Methodology**

The method of data collection employed in this study is covert participant observation. In this covert participant strategy, the two researchers, disguised as worshipers, attended religious programmes in eight churches randomly selected from Awka metropolis. The covert entry into the field was adopted because it guarantees objectivity as well as access to undiluted data. Justifying this disguised method of data collection, Whyte says,

The roles of spy and researchers are alike in that both conceal their true objective; they differ markedly in commitment and objectives. The spy is a partisan, working for one side against the other in an active or latent conflict situation, gathering information for the purpose of damaging individuals or organizations on the opposing side. The researcher should be committed to the gathering of information to increase scientific knowledge. In reporting the findings the researcher is obligated to try to avoid damaging the organization or its members. (164-5)

Thus, to avoid any damage to the institutions involved, the names of the churches visited are withheld as the thrust of the paper lies not in the institutions but in the incidence of concord errors in the utterances of preachers. The goal of the research is therefore not to undermine the image of the clergy but to promote scholarship.

The researchers attended a total of twenty preaching sessions within a period of two months. Electronic devices were used to record the



sermons. For accuracy, notes were also taken by the researchers during the observation to forestall any recording lapses. From the plethora of linguistics deviations gathered in the data, only concord errors are extracted and presented for analysis on the grounds of relevance to the study.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

The concord errors found in the corpus are classified in the table below:

Type of concord error	Number of occurrence
Subject – Verb	113
Inconsistency in Tense usage	41
Pronoun – Antecedent	32
Subject – Complement	15
Shift in Voice	11
Concord of Person	10
Concord with Correlatives	9
Subject – Object	7

The above table highlights subject-verb concord, pronoun-antecedent concord and inconsistency in tense usage as the most common concord errors committed by the subjects of this study. The least is Subject-Object concord errors.

Most errors of subject-verb concord and pronoun-antecedent concord in the corpus are interlingual in nature. Majority of the pastors speak Igbo as their first language and there is no distinction between a singular verb and a plural verb in Igbo syntax. Again, there is no gender distinction between a masculine and feminine pronoun. The errors are therefore caused by interference of the subjects' first

language (Igbo) with the English language (L<sub>2</sub>). Inconsistency in tense usage and the other types of concord errors discovered in this work are caused by non-mastery of the rules of concord in English.

The following are samples of different types of concord errors discovered in the corpus.

### **Subject – Verb Concord**

In each of the sentences numbered 1- 16, there is lack of agreement either in number or in person between the subject and the verb. The erroneous verbs are in bold while the correct ones are enclosed in brackets.

1. \*Crosses lose their bitterness when we see the love with which God send them. (sends)
2. \*Some people has acquired the wisdom of Solomon. (have)
3. \*Death become sweet when you live a good life. (becomes)
4. \*When a priest see that his parishioners need miracle, he will start his own church. (sees)
5. \*Your husband now offer you a key to the latest car in town. (offers)
6. \*God give you what he want to give you. (gives, wants)
7. \*No parents should do that. It always backfire. (backfires)
8. \*Satan has one objective. He want to enter you and possess you. (wants)
9. \*The soul who sin shall die. (sins)
10. \*Unless you knows how to apply the spiritual warfare, .... (know)
11. \*Money is what the poor needs. (need) (Nominalized adjectives as a rule agree with plural verbs)

12. If there is a generous souls, .... (If there are generous souls, ....)
13. The second group the bible mention is the righteous people. (mentions)
14. And they who has been most dear to him.... (have)
15. Those who has two legs and two arms can't praise God like the cripple. (have)
16. Children of God, why doesn't you read the handwriting on the wall? (don't)

### **Inconsistency in Tense Usage**

In the sentences numbered 17- 26, the subjects demonstrate blatant ignorance of the rules of sequence of tenses. Thus, there are profuse cases where the present tense is used in a grammatical slot meant for the past tense.

17. \*Jesus descended from heaven; he fought and conquer the battle. Alleluia! (conquered)
18. \*This spiritual father frowned and rebukes the devil. (rebuked)
19. \*This was what happens to Caiaphas..... (happened)
20. \*This morning you ate three bags of rice. Yesterday, do you know how many bags of rice you eat? (ate)
21. \*He move and God spoke. (moved)
22. \*That was the first thing they do. They stripped Jesus. (did)
23. \*When they saw him coming, they run away. (ran)
24. \*Then Jesus touches the man who was crippled for years. (touched)
25. \*I say to him "what you lost was your hand and not your head." (said)

26. \*The problem escalated when they see their dead members.  
(saw)

### **Pronoun – antecedent Concord**

A pronoun must agree with its antecedent in number, case and gender. However, this rule is not observed in some of the sentences in the data.

27. \*The lady in question ran back to the church to search for his pastor. (her)
28. \*I prayed and fasted for the lady and he gave birth to a bouncing baby boy. (she)
29. \*The man boasted and boasted about his money. Oh... behold she was humbled by God. (he)
30. \*The mermaid spirits wash her hands in the foolish man's blood, gosh! (their)
31. \*Yeh! Don't go about complaining when one is confronted with a problem he or she prays against. (one)
32. \*Then Jesus touched the woman and he was made whole. (she)

### **Subject-complement Concord**

The subject of a sentence must agree with its complement in relation to number, but this is not the case with the following sentences:

33. \*Most African husbands are tyrant.(tyrants)
34. \*Yes, I mean exactly what I have said; the young lady is evil spirits. (an evil spirit)
35. \*A successful cross is victories for children of God. (a victory)
36. \*The saints become the prince of the martyrs (princes)

37. \*Men are no longer ashamed to say they are homosexual. (homosexuals)
38. \*All our daily crosses sometimes are attribute of ignorance. (attributes)
39. \*I heard rumours about how I made my money. Jesus and the Holy Spirit are my sponsor. (sponsors)
40. \*In heaven Mary is the super hero. (heroine)
41. \*The evil spirits are their master. (masters)

### **Subject – Object Concord**

There is always a concord of person, number and gender between a subject and object if the objective element is a reflexive pronoun. For example:

- The girls enjoyed themselves. (Plural subject + plural object reflexive pronoun).
- She enjoyed herself. (a feminine singular subject + a feminine reflexive pronoun)

This rule is breached in some sentences of the data, as in:

42. \*Satan has one objective. He wants to enter yourself and possess yourself. (you)
43. \*The angels are far more in number than human being (human beings)
44. \*Yes, you ought to listen to you when you pray. (yourself)
45. \*The evil spirit threw the girl on the floor. She injured himself. (herself)
46. \*You are counted among the bastard. (bastards)
47. \*Some Christians are living their life carelessly. (lives)

### Concord of Person

There should be concord of person between the subject and its verb in a sentence. As observed in the data, the second person pronoun is often erroneously used with the third person singular verb as seen in 48 and 50.

48. \*I repeat, my brethren, you has no right to question God.  
(have)
49. \*Mary Magdalene was special to Jesus because she were the first person to see him after his resurrection. (was)
50. \*You chooses to be wicked or good. You know, the choice is yours. (choose)

### Shift in Voice

The rule of concord in English states that there must be agreement in person, number, gender, voice and tense. If shifts occur in any of these, the result is usually an awkward, inconsistent and ungrammatical structure. The following are some of the sentences made by the subjects of the study. The sentences are unacceptable because of the inconsistency or shift in voice.

51. \*Indeed Jesus suffered oh! The Jews arrested him, accused him falsely and he was crucified. – Active + active + passive.  
(... and crucified him – active + active + active)
52. \*We sang, prayed, fasted and we were possessed by the Holy spirit – Active + active + active + passive (... the Holy Spirit possessed us. – active + active + active + active)
53. \*Elijah was created, Jeremiah was created, Ezekiel was created and God did not create Jesus. – Passive + passive + passive + active (... Jesus was not created by God. – passive + passive + passive + passive)

### **Concord with Parenthetical Elements**

Parenthetical subjects are attached to the real subjects by means of such conjunctions as: as well as, together with, along with, accompanied by, in collaboration with, among others. In agreement, the choice of the verb that co-occurs with the subject is determined by the first of the subjects.

54. \*The devil in collaboration with his agents make Christians' crosses. (makes; agrees with 'devil')
55. \*At the crusade arena, the foreign pastor with the children of God were overwhelmed. (was; agrees with 'pastor')

### **Concord with Correlatives**

Correlatives are conjunctions that come in pairs such as 'either ... or', 'neither... nor', 'not ...only but'. The rule is that the verb should agree with the part of the subject nearer to it, that is the second subject. However, in the sentence below, the verb 'are' is erroneously made to agree with the 1<sup>st</sup> person pronoun 'I' instead of the verb 'am'.

56. \*Yes my brethren, neither you nor I are perfect before our maker. We all have fallen short of the Glory of God. (am)

### **Conclusion**

The findings of the research reveal that the mastery of the rules of concord in English as well as the general principles that guide the co-occurrence of certain linguistic elements for an acceptable linear sequence possess a big challenge to some Nigerian preachers. Their weaknesses in the observation of the rules of concord are particularly noticeable in subject –verb concord, pronoun-antecedent concord and inconsistency in tense usage. There are also deviant utterances in other areas of concord. Some of the errors are interlingual while others are intralingual in nature.

The knowledge of concord in English grammar is a pre-requisite for correct English usage. To carry a congregation along, a pastor is expected to be proficient in the use of English. His ego is thus at stake

if he exhibits a poor command of the language. This linguistic ineptitude might expose him to ridicule, thereby jeopardizing the business of winning souls for God. Besides, sermons marred by concord incongruity will undermine the quality of English acquired by the congregation. This becomes particularly dangerous for pupils and students who are usually members of such groups.

It is pertinent to remark that the high incidence of concord errors in the corpus may be as a result of the spontaneous nature of the sermons. Thus, it is possible that if the subjects had the opportunity to edit their speeches, some of them would have been able to correct some of the errors.

### **Recommendations**

Preachers who are incompetent in the use of English must make effort to improve on their performance. They can achieve this by reading copiously works written by English language experts. Good literary texts are indispensable in this pursuit.

Preachers should painstakingly preparing their sermons and such sermons ought to be proof-read thoroughly before they are presented to a listening audience.

A preacher who is not sure of his competence in the use of English ought to give his sermon to English language experts for editing before it is presented to his congregation.

It is advisable that a preacher records his spontaneous speeches in the church and later plays them at his leisure. This exercise will help him discover his errors and mistakes. It equally paves the way for the preacher's better performance in future.

Preachers should make use of the bibles that are written in modern English.

Semi-literate pastors have to engage in either part-time or full-time studies in order to improve on their use of English.



The congregation should make conscious efforts not to be influenced by preachers' concord errors or other aberrations in the use of English.

English language teachers can surreptitiously record such utterances and use them as teaching aids. However, the anonymity of the preachers must be ensured.

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