

## **Syntactic Study of English Concord Difficulties Encountered by Students of Management Sciences in Akwa Ibom State University**

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### **Abstract**

*This study attempts a critical survey on the grammatical inadequacies that have plagued the performances of second language user/learners of the English language in the Use of English course and the resultant effect of these shortcomings on the educational systems, a package of problems traceable to lack of proficiency in the area of concord. To achieve this purpose, five departments were selected from the six departments of the faculty of Social and Management Sciences, Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa Campus, and 150 students (30 from each department) were selected by stratified random sampling technique from a total of 673 students of year 1, direct entry years 2 and 3 as well as carry forward students of years 2 and 3 of the five departments selected. The theoretical frameworks employed for this study are the Surface Strategy Taxonomy and Comparative Taxonomy. The instrument for data collection was Objective Test, thoroughly supervised to ensure validity; fifty objective questions on concord were administered on the sample, and the data collected were analysed, using '80' as the standard mean for competence. The result reveals that the subjects' 'over all' mean score of 44.2, fell below the standard, denoting lack of competence in the area of concord. As a result of the findings, recommendations were made, one of which is a call for a review of the present language curriculum to include extensive and exhaustive topics on concord principles and other verb-related topics in order to attain improved level of attention*

*on these areas in order to bridge the Gap between Teaching and Research for a Reflective Nigerian Society.*

**Keywords:** English concord difficulties, grammatical inadequacies, educational systems, level of attention, teaching and research

### **Introduction**

Sentence construction is basically a reflection of 'Concord' agreement which constitutes the bedrock of English grammar. This is because one would scarcely produce any grammatical utterance without a considerable level of competence in that area. Since literacy calls for one to be able to speak, read and write properly, it has tended to be humiliating to have an encounter with people who have attained at least secondary education, unable to adhere to the basic rules that govern the English Language (Ogbonna, 2013:1). There is therefore, the feeling that user/learners' proficiency in the language at all levels of the educational system is quite low, despite the prominent position English language occupies and the functional workloads with which it operates globally (Otagburuaga and Enuesike 1998:17).

In fact, the competence in the acquisition and use of the English Language by students generally has been on a steady downhill slide and this phenomenon is most noticeable or marked in students with the science-oriented fields of specialty. It is a challenging need which is staring us in the face, because there is the expectation that every literate person should be able to have 'a control' of the language of instruction, especially in a situation where such a language is also the official language of the country (Ogbonna, 2013:2).

To be ungrammatical in the construction of sentences in the target language is an abuse to the language which may result in confusion and a breakdown in communication; a performance which belies the grammatical role expectation from such a user/learner.

### **On Researches on Concord agreement as a Concept**

Concord, also known as agreement is a grammatical concept in sentence construction and is basically concerned with the manner in which a noun or pronoun relates with the verb in a sentence. It is centered on

agreement in number, of the subject of a sentence, with the verb of that sentence. Put in a different way, concord means agreement between different parts of a sentence, such as the subject and the predicate. Concord, in the words of older grammarians like Francis (1986:309) and Quirk (1985:755), is “the relationship between grammatical units in such a way that one of them displays a particular feature (e.g. plurality) that accords with a displayed (or semantically implicit) feature in the other”. Dodano (2008), in the like manner upholds that concord is a grammatical relationship of the words, which affects the form of one or more of them. Hasselgard (1999), cited in Ogbonna (2013) are of the opinion that:

*Concord is agreement in grammatical form between elements in a clause or phrase. The term refers most commonly to the agreement in the form of the subject and the form of a verb in a sentence. It also applies to the relation between noun phrases and co-referential pronouns.*

In the same vein, Baker (2003) and Drennan (2003) see concord as agreement in gender, case, number or person between different words that share a reference. In a more technical platform, Eka (1994:181) noted that three subtypes of concord are often isolated in English: subject-verb concord, pronoun-antecedent concord and time reference concord.

### **I. On Subject-Verb Concord**

The first rule of concord agreement states that a verb must agree in number with its subject. It means that there should be harmony between the subject and the verb, Eka (1994:181-182). Zenteno (2008) cited in Ogbonna (2013:8) notes that it is the most important type of concord in English, and involves mainly number and or person. Drennan (2003) and Zenteno again agree that there are **three principles** which regulate this concord's first rule (S-V Concord): formal or grammatical concord, notional or semantic concord and proximity concord.

### **Grammatical Concord**

This type requires agreement between the grammatical form of the verb and the grammatical form of the number. Hassselgard et al (1999:2) informs that this is the principle that dictates that the subject must agree in number (singular subject with singular verb and plural subject with plural verb) with its subject; a general or conventional principle which, however, is not followed accordingly by some elements in some constructions; and in some cases, it leads to conflict with other grammatical concord or principles. For instance, the pronouns 'I' and 'You' do not obey the subject-verb concord rule, they normally agree with the plural forms of both modal auxiliaries and possessive pronouns, such as:

1. *I have a car* (not *I has a car*) or *I have come* (not *I has come*).
2. *You are to leave now*. (whether singular or plural) or *You have to come early*.

The forms of the verb which these two elements agree with are all plurals as against the singular forms dictated by this first rule. Ungrammatical constructions would however, appear if these two forms of grammatical subjects accept the principle. For instance,

3. \* *I has a car* or *I has come*. (ungrammatical)
4. \* *You is to leave now* or *You has to come early*. (ungrammatical)

These are ungrammatical constructions which would result from the first rule if all the grammatical forms of the subject accept the rule.

### **Notional Concord**

This is agreement of verb with its subject according to the idea/notion of number. This concept allows the notion of 'singular and' 'plural' in the subject instead of using the grammatical form to determine the form of the verb to be used. This agreement is therefore, based on the notion or the idea of number, rather than on the actual presence of the grammatical or formal marker of such an element. That is why McArthur (1998) sees it as agreement by meaning rather than by grammar, in contrast to, and in conflict with grammatical concord. For instance, using the 'collective nouns' such as 'family', 'audience', 'police', 'team' etcetera. The following expressions are acceptable both at the levels of grammatical and notional concords:

5. My *family* sends greetings to you. (grammatical concord), where “family” is regarded as a singular or a united entity functioning as subject and so attracts a singular verb ‘sends’ to match.
6. My family are here for the show. (grammatical concord is broken), where singular subject attracts a plural verb because the notion of plurality is present in the subject “family”; and so is here treated as the individual members who make up the group or collection.
7. Our *team* was able to beat *its* opponent in the football encounter.(treated as No.5 above).
8. Nigeria Police receive bribes on their duty posts.(treated as No.6 above).

### **Proximity Concord**

This theory recognizes agreement with the closest subject (noun or pronoun). According to Frank and Ernest (2010:7) and Drennan (2003:2):

The principle of proximity involves number attraction and denotes formal agreement between the initial constituent of the verb phrase and the noun/pronoun that most closely precedes it; by so doing, grammatical concord is established between these elements instead of the normal agreement of the head of the noun phrase/subject. Put differently, proximity concord rule states that in the case where a correlative joins two subjects together, whether compound singular or plural subjects, and there is a difference in number (the first subject may be singular while the second is plural or vice versa) between the two subjects in a construction or sentence, the verb **MUST** agree in number with the nearer subject as in the following examples:

9. Either the boys or their lecturer *is* to sign this document on behalf of the Head of Campus. Here, ‘the boys’ and ‘the lecturer’ (subjects of the sentence), differ in number and so, the verb ‘is’ agrees with the nearer subject which is ‘the lecturer’.

Apart from the three subtypes of concord discussed above, there are other rules of concord advanced by different authors on various situations that should be adhered to in order to ensure the construction of error-free sentences. These other rules include the following:

Adjectives (in base form) being used as nouns takes the plural verb when they describe or refer to persons – personal adjectives (Drennan 2003:3; Frank and Ernest 2010:7 ) for example:

10. The poor deserve our sympathy. (poor people)

11. The wicked are normally kept in the prison. (wicked people)

When such adjectives are non-personal (not referring to persons), the singular verb is used (Drennan 2003:2-3), for instance:

12. No evil deed goes unpunished. (evil thing)

13. The evil that men do lives after them

Other adjectives that are noun-based which also attract singular verbs are listed below:

The accused- singular or plural; the deceased (specific reference); The insured- singular or plural.

**Note:** But there are some exemptions or exceptions to the three subtypes discussed above:

Exemption 1:

When the word ‘and’ is replaced with such words as: *with, as well as, together with*, etc. the verb becomes singular.

Example: The boy *as well as* the girl *is* here tonight.

Here, the verb becomes singular.

Further Examples:

1) The boy *with* his sister *is* here.

2) The boy *as well as* his sister *leaves* for Lagos tomorrow.

3) The boy *together with* his sister *arrives* here shortly.

Exemption 2:

When a Compound Subject joined by ‘and’ gives the impression of a unit, the verb becomes singular as in the following.

1) Bread and Tea *is* ready for your breakfast.

Breakfast (S<sub>1</sub>)      V<sub>1</sub>

2) Garri and soup *tastes* deliciously

.                      Food (S<sub>1</sub>)      V<sub>1</sub>

Exemptions 3:

When a Compound Subject is concerned with correlatives (Neither-Nor, Either-or, Not only-but also) the singular verb is used.

Example:

1. Neither the teacher nor the student *is* here.
2. Either the boy or the girl *plays* the piano.
3. Not only John but also Mark *does* it.

**Note:** But when the nouns joined by correlative differ in number the verb agrees in number with the nearer noun as:

1. Neither the students nor their teacher *is* quite prepared.
2. Neither the teacher nor the students *are* quite prepared.

Apart from the fore going exceptions there are problems one needs to guard against:

**The first problem** is connected with Collective Nouns.

Choir, Committee, Jury, Team, Congregation, Army, Audience

The above collective nouns can take singular or plural verb depending on the speaker's notion. The problem therefore is that many of us do not limit ourselves to one number in this regard. Such inconsistency results to a grammatical fault called '**shifting in number**', noted below.

1. The choir *is* singing their song (*is* - singular, *their* - Plural)
2. The army *are* determined to probe *its* officers (*are* -Plural, *its*- singular, *their*)
3. The team *is* doing their best. (*is* - singular, *their* - Plural)

One can avoid the shift in number by using a number you have chosen consistently as in the following:

1. The choir *is* singing *its* songs.
2. The army *are* determined to probe *their* officers.
3. The team *is* doing *its* best.

1. None, is an exception to the indefinite pronouns rule, it takes either singular or plural depending on the context: e.g.

None *are* so deaf as those who will not listen.

None *is* here to receive him.

**2. Periods of time**, amount of money, measurements and weights mileage, are generally regarded as a singular unit, therefore, they take singular verb e.g.

1. Twenty one years is too long to be far away from home.
2. One hundred naira buys little these days.
3. Three miles is too far for a child to walk to school.

**The second problem** has to do with a collection followed by 'of' and a plural noun as in;

A collection of partings, a case of instrument, a team of athletes. a flock of sheep. All the collections above normally take the word "does" or 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular. Singular to the above is the use of *one of* plus a plural noun as in:

One of: the boys, the students, my friends, the teachers, my cousins, the girls my relatives.

**Note:** Structures like the above take the singular verb. Also taking singular verbs are ***indefinite pronouns***:

Each, Every, Everybody, Everyone, Nobody, None -

**The third problem** is concerned with verb modified by such auxiliaries as "do, be, have", as in

do,	does	play
He -	-	sing
We-	-	dance

Experience has shown that, in primary sentence building, many people, have a problem in applying the first rule of concord agreement correctly.

The problem results in structures like:

* He	do	plays
*The	man	have gone

It is therefore important to know that when auxiliary verbs follow a main verb, it is the auxiliary which takes the singular marker from the verb. Thus, we have:

He does play
The man has gone



Finally some nouns are either in inherently singular or plural, before one uses a noun one should make sure that it does not belong to this class of in inherently singular/plural (nouns by consulting his/her dictionary).

## **2. On Pronoun-Antecedent Concord Agreement**

Antecedent means what proceeds.

**Note:** The 2nd rule of agreement states that a pronoun must agree in , gender and case with its antecedent: this rule implies that:

1. A pronoun replacing a noun must have the same number as the noun it replaces
2. A pronoun replacing a noun must be masculine if the noun is masculine, feminine if the noun is feminine and neuter if the noun is neuter.
3. A subject noun must be replaced by a subject pronoun,, an objective noun is replaced by an objective pronoun.

### **1. Number**

- (i) Nigeria expects everyone to do his duty (*everyone* -singular noun, *his*- singular pronoun
- (ii) The kind and the wicked have their place in fiction.
- (iii) Neither the students nor the teacher lost his ticket.
- (iv) All men are created equal. They are endowed by God
- (v) Our lecturer stood his ground even when he was wrong.
- (vi) Each of the students wanted to express his opinion.
- (vii) Some women are fickle-minded. They do not reason.

### **2. CASE**

- (i) All Women are created equal. They are endowed by God with wisdom.
- (ii) Some women are fickle-minded. They do not reason
- (iii) I met the Man I gave him the letter.

him in the 2nd part of the sentence is an indirect object, it is just like saying: I gave the letter to him. One should take note of the following terms as they are very useful in this aspect of sentence constructions.

- Subject - nominative  
 Exclamation - Vocative  
 Object - Accusative  
 Of - genitive (showing procession)  
 To/for - Dative (a special fm indirect Object)  
 In, with, by - Ablative (that which carries the meaning of by, with, her in a sentence.)  
 (iv) The lady sang a beautiful song but when she was accompanied, she croaked.  
 (v) Because he was lazy, the man could not farm.  
 (vi) I forgave the criminal, but warned him to desist from such acts

### **Gender**

- (i) Look at this lady. We believe she is ill.  
 (ii) Life in Nigeria is difficult. We expect the Government to improve it.  
 (iii) Whatever my father orders, me to do I obey him.  
 (iv) My Mother is kind, therefore, everybody likes her.  
 (v) When old men speak we should listen to them.  
 (vi) Since the boy has not come, we should wait for him

**A verb in a sentence must agree with its subject in number.** An error in this may be caused by one of the following mistakes:

- (1) Failure to identify the true subject.
- (2) Failure to identify the number of the verb, and
- (3) Failure to identify the number of the subject.

The best way to deal with this problem is to (proof) read your work carefully. Read over aloud to yourself or to a friend who is willing to criticize you.

### **3. On the Aspect of Shift in Construction**

To maintain a single idea, *the third rule of agreement says that sentence must be the same in person, number, voice and tense.* By this rule, we are asked not to shift from one person to the other, one number to the other, one voice to the other and one tense to the other when expressing a single idea. We may not understand the meaning of person and voice. But we assume that one should know what tense is. Without attempting

to define voice, we begin by telling us what voice is, by using examples. Voice makes the difference between the following e.g

- a. Mark killed a snake (Active Voice)
- b. A snake was killed by Mark (Passive Voice)

In (a), the subject of the Sentence is Mark, who killed the snake, the object. The Sentence is in the **active voice**.

In fact, most of the sentences we have come across are in the active voice - the agent in an active voice is the subject of the sentence. In short, the active subject ceases to be active in the passive voice. An important question is: why passive voice? or why do we use passive voice? There are three essential situations in which you use the passive:

1. When the active subject is unknown or cannot be easily expressed.

e.g.:

- (i) A man was shot (who shot the man?)
- (ii) A cry was heard (from where? Who cried?)
- (iii) A need was felt (by whom, that what should happens)

2. When the active subject is self-evident from the context

- (i) The lady was murdered –(by anybody)
- (ii) The food was eaten – (it must have been eaten by anybody)
- (iii) The room was swept –(by anybody)
- (iv) The singer was praised – (anybody or audience)

3. When tact and delicacy of sentiment is acceded.

- (i) We should have been informed
- (ii) They would have been told
- (iii) The worker should have been discussed

Those in the sciences use the passive voice in reporting their experiments. It is therefore, an important structure for science students.

### **I. Do not change from one person to the other as in:**

- a. When **you** (2nd person) get into plane, **one** (3rd person) feels comfortable.
- b. I (1st person) enjoy farming because it helps you (2nd person) appreciate nature
- c. We take (1st person) examination because it makes you (2nd person) nervous.

- d. For one (3rd person) to succeed in the next examination I (1st person) must study hard.

Such shifts in person violate the third rule of agreement. You may, therefore recast the sentences thus:

- a. When one (3rd person) gets into the plane one (3rd person) feels comfortable.  
b. I (1st person) enjoy farming because it helps me (1st person) appreciate nature.  
c. We (1st person) hate examination because they make us (1st person) nervous.  
d. For one (3rd person) to succeed in the examination one (3rd person) must study hard.

**2. Do not shift from one voice to another as in:**

- (i) He abhorred injustice and all workers were treated kindly.  
*abhorred is (active voice) and while were treated is (passive voice)*  
(ii) He stood up, spoke sternly, (active voice) and was seated. (passive voice)  
(iii) They dragged him, (active voice), tortured him (active voice) and was murdered. (passive voice)  
(iv) We were punished (passive voice) but they praised him. (active voice)

To maintain a simple idea we recast the sentences thus:

- (i) He abhorred (active voice) injustice and treated (active voice) all workers kindly  
(ii) He stood (active voice) up, spoke sternly and sat (active voice) down.  
(iii) They dragged (active voice) him, tortured (active voice) him and murdered (active voice) him.  
(iv) We were punished (active voice) but he was praised (active voice)

**Note the Exceptions.**

The examples have shown us that shift in voice can also involve shift in the subject as in 1.

1. Where the subject changes to all workers
2. Where it changes to he, and in
3. Where it changes to they.

We must point out that there are situations where shifts in voice produce stylistic effect as in:

We stated the facts, they doubted them.

There is a repetition of they and them which produces a clumsy use of they and them. Similarly, the following are standard English in spite of the shift in voice.

1. The thief twisted through heavy traffic to elude the police. He was almost trapped between a bus and a lorry, but squeezed through and sped on.
2. Although he managed to hide safely for two hours at the back of the house, he was finally cornered and arrested by the police.

In the above examples, the use of the passive allows us to maintain the same subject, where this is our focus of attention. Despite the voice used, there should be agreement between the subject and the verbs and the object.

**3. Do not shift your tense while expressing a single idea e.g.**

- (i) We rushed (past) to the party but nobody is (present) there.
- (ii) The theme of the novel is (present) the horror of the traditional beliefs. The novel described (past) how Ikemefuna was killed (past) by his step father to appease the gods.

These are corrected thus:

1. We rushed (past) to the party, but nobody was (past) there.
2. The theme of the novel is the horror of the traditional beliefs. The novel describes (present) how Ikemefuna is killed by his step father to appease the gods.

**Note:** That, even though the event took place in the past in example 2, the present tense is used. We call this kind of tense “Historic Present” common in the field of literature because it is the style of literary studies, we observe that *shift in tense* is a common mistake among students of literature.

### **Conclusion**

This paper was concerned with the study of the problems of English Concord encountered by students of Management Sciences of Akwa Ibom State University in both their written and spoken English as revealed in their performances in the Use of English course. The instrument used for the collection of data was test questions. The instrument for data collection was Objective Test Questions thoroughly supervised to ensure validity. There were 50 questions on the whole and were administered to a total of 150 students and the data collected was analysed, using ‘80’ as the standard mean for competence. The scores for each department were summed up, and the mean score noted down. The result reveals that the subjects’ ‘over all’ mean score, 44.2 against ‘80’ fell below the standard, denoting lack of competence in the area of concord.

A greater number of second language users of English Language operate at a low level of competence in the area of concord, as could be seen in the subjects’ performance in the test.

Most user/learners’ problems in concord is on the aspects that have to do with verbs (pure, modal and main), especially, where the need for a careful manipulation of number disparity amongst subjects is a necessity.

It has also been concluded that some of the concord errors committed by second language user/learners arise from the subject-verb rules that are conflicting, troublesome and confusing, especially, when the various exceptional rules are disregarded.

### **Way Forward**

In view of the findings made on this study and the conclusion drawn from such findings, the researcher makes the following recommendations.

1. The language curriculum used currently should be reviewed by designers to bring in extensive topics on concord principles; more

grammar topics, mostly those that have to do with the verbal group for inclusion in the scheme of work and syllabuses. This done will bring about the expected concern for such aspects.

2. Painstaking and thorough teaching of topics on concord should be carried out by teachers of English to ensure adequate and wider exposure of the learner in that area.
3. Our teachers of English at the secondary schools and the lecturers of the Use of English in tertiary institutions should, as a matter of necessity, employ the interactive/question-answer method in their lessons not only to make the class lively and interesting at each point in time, but also to get the learners involved. By this, the user/learners' areas of weakness will easily be identified and promptly attended to.
4. Before and after each lesson on concord, exercises comprising increased number of objective questions on it should continually be administered to the learners, and subsequently backed up by comprehensive corrections to show, not only the answers, but also how the answers are arrived at.
5. The purchase of text books on English should be made compulsory by individual teachers of English, with a concomitant backing by the authorities, to the extent that it becomes a condition to be fulfilled before registration for courses could be actualized.
6. Another of such study should be carried out, using these particular test questions on a different group of students, preferably undergraduates too with a different faculty, location, sample size; this is still for the purpose of comparing the results, for solidification of the claims of the study due generalization of same.

Finally, to ensure that research findings, conclusions, both specific and generation recommendations are incorporated into the Use of English course curriculum to make teaching and learning of English in a second language situation meaningful and realistic, researches should be carried out by pure scholars/ academics, not academic politicians, in order to bridge the gap between teaching and research for a reflective Nigerian society.

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