

TENSE AND CONCORD

Tense and concord are two concepts that are central to English grammar and to our understanding of how English sentences can be effectively used to convey our thoughts.

In second language situation such as Namibia and other parts of Africa, the English language is superimposed on our indigenous languages. In addition, English is only formally acquired in schools. Before an average Namibian come into contact with the English language he /she would have had a reasonable mastery of his or her mother tongue.

This situation gives rise to what is known as ‘linguistic interference’. It is linguistic interference that accounts in most cases for the difficulty we have in expressing ourselves in English proficiently. Errors in the use of concord and tense are also caused mainly by the complexity of the English language itself as well as the inadequate mastery of the English language and some sociological and psychological factors.

Errors of concord and tense constitute one of the major problems that second English learners have to overcome. This can be achieved by a better understanding of the concepts involved and an analytical awareness of how the structure of the English language is different from the structures of our indigenous languages. A good knowledge of the differences between the structure of the English language and the structure of one’s mother tongue can go a long way to eliminate the problems that learners encounter in their English usage.

Let us consider one complexity of the English language that is a source of difficulty for second language learner.

The suffix-s

This suffix is used in English to mark plurality. For example we add the suffix ‘s’ to singular nouns to change them into the plural form as can be seen in the following examples:

Singular	Plural
Boy	boys
Table	tables

This appears to be a simple rule to follow, but the confusion comes for us as second language users when the same form-‘s’ is equally used to distinguish the third-person singular form in the present tense as illustrated in the following sentences:

1. The girl dances well
2. She walks to school

The confusion in the use of ‘s’ arises from the fact that the same morphological process is used to distinguish two distinct properties of the same language.

As if that confusion is not enough, the same process applies to the rule in English that stipulates concord or agreement between the subject and the verb of a sentence in terms of

number- that is singular and plural. This rule further complicates an existing problem in the use of the suffix ‘s’ especially with the concept of number.

Here are some examples of this rule in practice:

3. Singular

- a. The student sleeps soundly
- b. The dog barks often

4. Plural

- a. The students sleep soundly
- b. The dogs bark often

Now if we look at the rule governing the pluralisation of nouns as in examples 1 and 2 above we would normally have assumed that because the subjects of sentence 3a and 3b are in the singular, the verbs should not have been marked with the suffix-‘s’ and that the subjects of the sentences in 4a and 4b should have been marked instead for plurality but this assumption does not hold because of the nature of English grammar. So for many second language users this is a source of difficulty.

In addition, the same suffix-‘s’ is also used along with apostrophe to mark possession. For example:

- 5. The boy’s shoe
- 6. The teachers’ books
- 7. Anita’s dress
- 8. The students’ forum

In order to overcome the difficulty that comes with this complexity, a second language learner has to master the different structural environments in which the suffix-‘s’ functions in English and to learn to use the form appropriately.

Concord

This is a concept that is used in grammatical theory and description to refer to formal relationships that exist between elements of grammar. In simple terms concord otherwise known as agreement simply means that a form of one word requires a corresponding form of another. Our sentences in 3 and 4 are examples of how concord or agreement operates in English.

There are various kinds of concord in the English language because the principle of agreement between forms is very central to syntax as the whole point about syntax is the interrelationships among linguistic structures.

Types of Concord

1. **The Verb ‘to be’-Concord** due to some morphological changes that occur in some verbs due to the selection of a particular personal pronoun. In other words, there is some form of agreement between the type of pronoun selected as subject and the form of the verb that goes with it. This relationship is found in the verb ‘to be’.

Firstly in the present tense, we have the following morphological changes:

i. The first person singular pronoun-I- must select ***am***

This choice gives us sentences like:

9) I am dancing

I am happy

I am a teacher

ii. Second Person (singular and plural) pronoun-you- occur with ***are***

10) You are dancing

You are happy

You are a prince

iii. The third person singular pronouns-he/she/it- select ***is*:**

11) He is dancing

She is dancing

It is a dog

iv. ***Are*** is used with the plural personal pronouns-we, they and you as in

12) We are dancing

You are dancing

They are dancing

In the past tense, there are two forms of the verb-to be-***was*** and ***were***. Their usage depends on the type of subject selected. If the subject is singular (no matter whether it is first or third person pronouns) the form ‘*was*’ is used as in:

13) I was dancing.

He was a doctor.

She was happy.

When the subject is plural, the form ‘*were*’, is used regardless of the type of pronoun selected as subject. Thus:

14) We were dancing.

They were dancing

You were strangers.

What is important for a second language learner of English is to know the types of subject that agrees with the different forms of the verb ‘to be’.

2. Agreement in terms of number (singular/plural)

This type of concord, as illustrated earlier, affects number realisation between the subject and verb of a sentence. **This appears to be the most important type of concord in English.** The relationship in this type of concord is as follows:

(i) A singular subject must select a singular verb. The following sentences illustrate this rule:

15) The man **goes** to school.

Salt **dissolves** quickly in water.

A dog **barks** at night.

The bag **is** open

(ii) A plural subject must select a plural verb. The following are examples of this rule:

16) The men go to school

Books dissolve quickly in fire

Dogs bark at night

The bags are open

3. Concord Relating to the nature of certain nouns

There are certain nouns which, in actual fact, are singular but typically denote a collection or group of individuals. These nouns are singular in form but are plural in meaning and they are referred to as collective nouns. Examples are: *government, people, army, team, staff and committee*. Nouns of this nature are different from other nouns such as book, table, baby because these later nouns denote a single entity.

The notion of number inherent in collective nouns implies that the concord relation that exists between the subject and the verb involves the idea of number rather than the actual presence of the number marker for that idea. Very often, collective nouns are used as subjects which select both a singular and plural verb. For example, both of these sentences are correct:

17) The government has failed the electorate

The government have failed the electorate.

In the first sentence in 17), the singular verb is used because the noun ‘government’, is perceived as a single body, whereas the selection of the plural verb in the second example implies that the noun ‘government’ is used to refer to individuals that make up the government. Other collective nouns with the same notional concord are *family, party, group, crew, company*.

4. Concord between subject and complement of a sentence

The rule here stipulates that if the subject of a sentence is singular then the complement must be singular and if it is plural, the complement must be plural. Let us compare the following sentences:

18) *That man* is a *prince*.

Those men are *princes*.

An Elephant is a huge *animal*.

Elephants are huge *animals*.

5. Concord involving the principle of proximity

This type of concord is a source of problem and difficulty for second language learners. The difficulty arises in sentences where some structure comes between the subject and the verb. For examples:

- 19) The lecturer with many national awards was elected president.
- 20) One of the students has been invited to address the press.

In both sentences, the subjects- 'lecturer' and 'one' are singular and are, accordingly, followed by singular verbs in spite of the proximity of the plural nouns '*awards*' and '*students*' to the verbs in the sentences. Here are other examples:

- 21) The behaviour of these ladies is shocking.
The register of all the pupils was compiled.
The leader of the rioters has surrendered.

From these examples, it is apparent that the rule in this kind of sentence construction is that a singular subject followed by a plural modifier will require a singular verb even though the verb may be immediately placed next to a plural noun that is functioning as a post modifier to the subject of the sentence.

A different but related consideration of the rule of proximity involves those cases when two or more subjects are connected by the coordinating conjunctions 'or' / 'nor' and are differently marked for number as in the following sentences:

- 22) The children or their father *is* washing the floor.
James or his friends *are* here.
Neither the rebels nor their leader *has* been arrested.

In all three examples the subject in the closest proximity to the verb determines the number marker for the verb.

6. Concord between Determiners and the Nouns they Modify

Determiners refer to words like, *the, his, that, your, several, all, etc.* **The important feature about determiners is that they always must occur with noun, as in:**

- 23) The man
Many people
These individuals

Some determiners also have singular and plural distinctions as in:

Singular	Plural
This	these
That	those
Each	some
Every	several
	most
	many.

As a result of the singular and plural distinction, when determiners occur with nouns they must agree in number with the noun that is being modified as in the following examples:

- 24) a. These students.
b. This pencil
c. All these books
d. All those little assignments

In addition, examples (24 c and d) show that two or three determiners can be used to modify a single noun. When this happens, the determiners also have to agree in terms of number. It is therefore necessary to know the order in which the determiners can co-occur with one another.

Determiners

Pre	Central	Post-
Group I	Group I/A	GROUP II
Both	the	whole
All	a/an	certain
Half	this/that	other
Such	these/those	few
Many	my, your, his, her	little
		Many
		Much
		Several
		First, second....

Determiners

Pre-	Central	Post-
Group III	Group I/B	Group III
Quite	some/any	same
No	very	only
	Every/each	
	(n)either	

Note: Group I/A determiners exclude each other in a noun phrase. This means no two group I determiners can occur together in a noun phrase.

In other words, the following constructions are wrong:

- 25) *this your book
*the those tables

In terms of distribution, Group IA determiners are central. This means that they will always come in the middle whenever there are two or three determiners before a noun as in:

- 26) All *these* other boys
Half *your* students

Group II determiners can modify a noun alone, but they can combine with articles and /or other determiners in GroupI/A and some of them with each other. For examples:

- 27) *Both* boys
The first boy
All your other tables

Some of the Group II determiners do occur as pre-determiners, while others occur at post-determiner position. For instance in the first Noun phrase in 26) ‘all’ is used as pre determiner while ‘other’ is used as a post determiner.

Group III determiners must be accompanied by an article or another determiner from Group I/A. For example:

- 28) *The only* candidate for the examination did not turn up.
That same mistake was repeated by him.

7. Concord Involving the Personal Pronouns in the Third Person

Pronouns refer to a closed set of items which can be used to substitute a noun or a noun phrase as in :

29) If Jane comes today; I will give her the money.

In sentence 29), the pronoun ‘her’ has been used in place of Jane.

Personal Pronouns are identified as follows:

(i)	Number		
	Singular		plural
	I		We
	You		you
	He/she/it		they
(ii)	Gender		
	Masculine	Feminine	Non-personal
	He	she	it
(iii)	Case	subject	Object
	Singular	I	me
		He	him
		She	her
	Plural	We	us
		They	them

Here are examples of their usage:

30) He travelled with them

I am a teacher

We are cowards

They Travelled to Zimbabwe.

The concord concerning the personal pronouns requires that the third person personal pronouns *he*, *she*, *it* and *they* must agree with their antecedents both in number and gender as in:

31) The students went to University of Ibadan, but *they* did not visit the zoo.

I saw Binta and *she* gave me the book.

Thomas went to school; *he* was there to submit his assignment.

TENSE

A proper understanding of tense can be achieved with a good understanding of the verb phrase in English. This is because tense is an element within the auxiliary; and the verb phrase is made up of the auxiliary and the main verb.

In addition, tense and the other elements of the auxiliary have a special way of relating to one another and to the main verb. These other elements of the auxiliary (apart from tense) are modal (shall, will, can, may...), the perfective aspect marked by the form of ‘have’ plus the past participle morpheme ‘en’, and the progressive or continuous aspect marked by the form of ‘be’, plus the present participle morpheme ‘ing’. Of all the elements that constitute the

auxiliary in English only tense is **obligatory**, the others-modal, perfective and progressive aspectual markers are optional.

Three basic tenses are identified in English grammar but technically, tense in English is either present or past. The three basic tenses are the present, the past and the future.

The present tense is used of:

- a) States that are permanent or likely to remain as they are for an indefinite period of time. For examples:
 - 1) The world is round
The earth goes round the sun.
 - b) Habitual actions as in:
 - 2) She goes to Cape town every month
The people celebrate this festival once in a year.

The past tense is generally used of actions or events which took place, and were completed in the past. Examples are:

- 3) Agnes took the book last week
I was in Maerua Mall yesterday.

The future tense is used of actions occurring during the future time as in:

- 4) My brother will buy a car next month.
I will sew the cloth tomorrow.

However, tense in English is strictly grammatical. Although certain time references are typically conveyed by particular tenses, the time references of such tenses are not restricted to those typical ones. For instance, even though the past tense typically expresses action that took place in the past, it often also expresses future or present action. For example:

- 5) If I were you I would not agree.

This example is marked formally for the past tense but it is used hypothetically to express present action.

The Modals

This is an optional element of the auxiliary. It is not so much concerned with time as with such things as possibility, ability, obligation and condition. However, the form ‘will’ and ‘shall’ are sometimes used to refer to the future time.

The modals occur only in the first element of the verb phrase and only at initial position. As a result, they cannot combine with each other nor can they change positions when combined with other elements of the auxiliary (the perfective and the progressive aspects). The verb following a modal is also not inflected for any form at all. For example:

- 6) I will go to school

I can play lawn tennis.
She must dance to the tune.
Michael may come to church on Sunday.
He ought to do the job.

The Aspects

As explained earlier, aspect can be either perfective or progressive. The perfective aspect gives us the perfective tense which can either be present or past. That is present perfect tense or past perfect tense.

The present perfect tense is most commonly used to describe actions or situations which started in the past, have continued to the present, and may still be continuing. For example:

- 7) My parents have been married for 53 years.

This means that my parents were married sometime in the past they are still married now and will/may stay married. In the example below;

- 8) She has been a nurse since she was eighteen

means the person referred to became a nurse at eighteen and is still a nurse now and may continue to be a nurse.

In addition, the present perfect tense is used to refer to actions or events which took place in the past, but whose consequences are still being felt. This usage can be seen in the following example:

- 9) Since nine eleven, the world has known no peace.

The important thing to note is not when or where the events or actions took place, but the fact that they have taken place.

The Past perfect tense is commonly used to refer to actions or events that took place, or situations that existed, before some other period of past time. For example:

- 10) He had already left the meeting when the chairman collapsed.

The car had not been sold when I went to the garage yesterday.

The main point in these two sentences is that two actions took place in the past but one took place before the other.

The progressive or the continuous aspect gives us the progressive tense which also can be present or past.

The present progressive is commonly used to describe present actions or events which are only temporary. For example:

- 11) We are producing Romeo and Juliet this year.

Secondly, the present progressive may describe actions or events which are actually taking place at the present time. Thus:

12) I am giving a lecture now.

The past progressive refers to past actions or events which were temporary or actions or events which actually were taking place at some point in the past. For example:

13) Literature students were reading Romeo and Juliet for the West African School Certificate Examination in the late 1970²
Africans were killing twins in the sixteenth century.

The first sentence in 13) expresses a past event which was temporary while the second sentence expresses an event which actually was taking place in the sixteenth century.

There is a sequence of relationship between tense and other elements of the auxiliary. That is modal and aspect. This relationship can be explained using the following sentences:

14) She could have been dancing.

In this sentence we have all the elements of the auxiliary present. That is, there is a combination of tense, modal, and the perfective and the progressive aspects. When this occurs, the modal precedes the other two aspects-have + en and be + ing. In addition, the tense is attached to the first verb element in the sequence, in this case the modal.

15) He has been playing the piano.

These examples show that the auxiliary may contain both elements within the aspect (have + en and be + ing). When both pairs are present, the perfective aspect comes before the progressive one and the tense affects the first element of the auxiliary in which case it will affect ‘have’.

16) She has stolen the bag

17) They were cooking rice.

Sentences (16 and 17) show that an auxiliary may contain one of the elements of aspect. When this happens, the tense will affect only the first element of the auxiliary in which case it will be ‘have’ if it is perfective as in 16) and ‘be’ if it is progressive as in 17).

18) I cooked rice last Sunday

This sentence shows that none of the auxiliary elements is present except tense.

The important point to note is that the first verbal element in the sequences has tense attached to it, regardless of which element it is. For instance, depending on the sequences as shown in our examples, tense will be attached to modal as in 14) in others ‘have’ as in 15) and 16) or ‘be’ as in 17) and in 18) the tense is attached to the verb because the other elements of the auxiliary are not present.

The examples we have illustrated above, show that most of the errors of tense that second language learners of English make are due to the violation of this sequence in the construction of sentences.