Linguistic Deviations in the Titles and Abstracts of Selected Postgraduate Theses: Examples of Arts and Science Postgraduate Students of Benue State University, Makurdi

Udoumoh, Anieti E. Adaje, A. Ochigbo, Adelabu, Bola S.,
Department of Educational Foundationsand General Studies,
Federal University of Agriculture, Makurdi

Abstract
This paper investigated linguistic errors in the titles and abstracts of selected theses of Arts and Science postgraduate students of Benue State University, Makurdi using Slovin’s formula, a sample of fifty out of fifty-eight theses was obtained from 2016 deposits in the University Postgraduate Library. Ten of these were from the Faculty of Sciences and forty were of the Faculty of Arts. Errors in the thesis abstracts and titles were identified, extracted and grouped into five categories: morphology, semantics, syntax, orthography and punctuation. Results show that a total of two hundred and forty five (245) errors were committed by the students; morphology (30.4%) and syntax (36.6%) errors had the highest frequency for Arts and Sciences respectively. Errors in semantics occurred only in the Arts while other categories of errors were common to the two groups. Therefore, it was concluded that theses of postgraduate students at the master’s degree level in the institution and, by implication, similar institutions manifest various linguistic deviations. It is recommended that adequate portions should be devoted to the teaching of basic elements of English grammar, semantics, syntax, punctuation, and spellings in the academic writing course designed for postgraduate students.

Introduction
Communication is a vital aspect of human existence. Life would indeed be chaotic without a means of communication especially in a multilingual nation like Nigeria. So, in order to solve the communication problem posed by a myriad of languages spoken by the various tribes and ethnic groups in Nigeria, English language has been adopted as the official language in Nigeria. The language has helped in unifying Nigerians and has affected all facets of life in the nation (Adewumi, 2012; Oluwado, 2016). Thus, English Language has been made a compulsory subject at all levels of schooling in Nigeria.

Over the years, different varieties of English have evolved. These include dialect, pidgin, broken, standard and non-standard Nigerian Englishes. (Adewumi, 2012). This makes acquiring proficiency in the language by students a difficult task because they encounter these different varieties in the course of learning sessions, listening to news, reading textbooks, etc. Therefore, given the differing levels of proficiency of instructors, newscasters, artistes, etc., students’ writings in English are marred by errors. These errors contribute to their poor performance in both spoken and written English in social and formal contexts. For instance, WAEC Chief Examiners’ Reports have highlighted some of the factors contributing to candidates’ poor performance to include poor writing skills, weak base in grammar, incomprehensible expressions, poor spellings and unlearned punctuating (Adedigba, 2016).

Errors are common features in language learning especially in the English as a second language situation. This has given rise to language theories on errors like the Contrastive Analysis, first
suggested by Whorf in 1941, and the Error Analysis propounded by S. P. Corder in 1971 (Khansir, 2012). While contrastive analysis centres on first language (L1) or mother-tongue interference on the target language, error analysis does not assess learners’ errors in the target language as interferences only but considers other factors that could cause errors in the language learning process (Khansir, 2012; Aqsa, Kazemian and Mustafai, 2015). It should also be noted that error analysis makes use of both oral and written productions The written language is our concern in this study.

Writing is believed to be a complex and difficult domain in language learning (Taylor, 2009). This is because it involves other sub-skills and writing mechanics. In the Nigerian academic sector, researches have shown that students’ written essays have greatly deviated from the standard rules and norms of English language being taught in schools by professionals (Anagbosho, 2010). Students churn out poorly written essays as evidenced in their notes, written tests, examinations and other academic writings like the thesis.

There are different types of writing, of course, but the communicative type of which thesis is an example is the onus of this research. This is because a student thesis is the only testament to his academic learning, inherent capabilities and linguistic proficiency in English language in the Nigerian context. At the master’s degree level, students engage in both oral and written seminar presentations. At the end of their studies, hard copies of their projects are submitted to their respective supervisors for grading. Thus, it is of utmost importance that these theses should be written error free. Interestingly, most supervisors and readers read the title and abstracts first before reading the main work (Emaikwu, 2015). This highlights the importance of the abstract in a thesis because an error-filled abstract may depict an error-filled research.

From the foregoing, many researches have been conducted using error analysis to account for errors and their types in the written essays of Nigerian students (Adewumi, 2012; Ojetunde, 2015 and Oluwado, 2016). However, not much has been done at the postgraduate level generally, and in thesis titles and abstracts in particular. Consequently, this study is an error analysis on the thesis titles and abstracts of master’s degree students. The aim is to find out the types of errors that postgraduate students commit in written English, after having learned and used it as medium of instruction from pre-primary school to postgraduate level. The research also verifies the types and frequencies of the errors committed in their theses.

**Research Questions**

The following questions guided the research:

i. What types of errors are committed by master’s degree students in their theses titles and abstracts?

ii. What errors has the highest frequency?

iii. What error is common to both Science and Arts master’s degree students?
Theoretical Framework
The theory adopted for this work is Error Analysis which is the study of deviant or unacceptable forms of linguistic items termed *error* in the spoken and written discourse of someone learning a foreign or second language (Brown, 2000; Sawalmeh, 2013). It came as an alternative in the 60s and 70s to the much criticised Contrastive Analysis. Corder, regarded as the proponent of error analysis, states that errors should not be prohibited as upheld by contrastive analysis because the pointthe fact that learning is taking place (Corder, 1967). He points out that just like a child, the errors made by a foreign or second language learner show that the learner is yet to internalise the system of the target language which could be due to several other factors besides mother tongue interference. In linguistics, such errors are distinguished from mistakes

Linguists like Brown (2000) and Norrish (Ridha, 2012) opine that an error is a noticeable and systematic deviation from the grammar of an adult native speaker and cannot be self-corrected. This is because the learner uses the deviant form over time consistently. On the other hand, a mistake is linked with performance and may occur as a result of extra-lingual factors like fatigue, inattention, and the likes. It occurs when a learner fails to use the appropriate linguistic item in a correct context. It can easily be noticed and self-corrected.

There are many types of errors which are grouped into two broad categories namely: Interlingua (caused by mother tongue or first language interference) and Interlingua (errors within the target language itself) errors. Richards (1970) and Brown (2000) state that errors can also be grouped based on levels of language e.g. discourse, grammar, orthography, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, etc. Brown further says that some errors can be overt (completely ungrammatical utterances at the sentence level) or covert (grammatically correct at the sentence level but not in the context of use). Generally, Brown explains that errors can be those of addition (adding unnecessary items), omission (omitting parts of linguistic elements), substitution (substituting an inappropriate item) and ordering (wrong listing of items).

Error analysis is significant in that it helps teachers to correct the errors made by their learners, improve on their teaching methods and materials and focus on those areas that require reinforcement (Al-Haysoni, 2012). It also provides real data on learners’ errors for analysis. However, error analysis tends to pay more attention to production data at the detriment of comprehension data. Also, it uses only learner’s output to obtain knowledge about language learning.

Conceptual Framework
The Abstract
An abstract is a brief summary of the major aspects which highlight the major contents written in a specified sequence in a paragraph of about three hundred words (more or less) depending on the type of research and the discipline (Emaikwu, 2015; Labaree, 2018). The abstract, therefore, identifies the main points of a work such as the problem under investigation, research question, design of the study, major findings, conclusion, recommendation, etc. In order to connect these
points into a meaningful whole, a basic English language proficiency is required because summary writing is a complex task in itself. Types of abstracts as listed by Hartley (2008), Romans (2011), Bui (2015) and Labaree (2018) include the informative or complete abstract (standalone abstract with full details of the research), descriptive, limited, indicative or highlight abstract (no details, just a highlight of the main points of the work), structured abstract (written uniquely under five sub-headings), critical abstract (provides judgement or evaluation besides the main points of the work) and graphical abstract (not a detailed summary of the work but may include pictures, animations or videos).

Guidelines on abstract writing vary across disciplines and universities (Emaikwu, 2015; Labaree, 2018). Generally, an abstract should not contain, among other things, lengthy background information, elliptical or disjointed phrases, jargons, unknown abbreviations or confusing terms. It should also be written in active voice using the past tense with strict adherence to good English grammar where the language is used.

The abstract is very important in a research because it can act as a stand-alone representation of the actual paper (Labaree, 2018). In scientific papers, it is a selling point and database engine on literature index. Some organisations also use the abstracts to select research proposals for grants. Therefore, if an abstract is badly written, it cannot truly represent the study, capture the interest of a prospective consumer or earn a student a good grade because the quality of the work can be inferred from its abstract.

Empirical Studies
Studies done within the error analysis framework in universities using postgraduates’ academic writings include that of Sereebenjapol (2003) who analysed the discussion section of postgraduate science students’ theses at Mahidol University in 2000. The most frequent errors identified were syntactic followed by errors in lexis, morphology and orthography. The causes include L1 interference, careless and incomplete applications. Similarly, Salman, Estefan and Yanseen (2017) analysed five master’s degree theses and five PhD dissertations of non-native Biology postgraduates. The research focused on punctuation marks. Using simple percentages, results show that both groups committed errors in punctuation with varying percentages. Oludare (2016) assessed eight dissertations at the Linguistics Department, University of Ibadan as follows: five master’s projects, one M.P2hil dissertation and two PhD theses. From the results, the concord errors made by the postgraduate students show lack of agreement between the subject and verbs, pronouns and antecedents, demonstratives and nouns, articles and nouns, the use of copula ‘is’ and the auxiliary ‘have’ which lacked agreement with the subjects used in the sentences. Research has shown that students from different institutions and levels counter a myriad of difficulties when writing in English as foreign learners. However, it has been noted that not much has been done in error analysis at the postgraduate level. Nevertheless, this paper investigates errors in the thesis abstracts and titles of both Arts and Science master’s students in terms of types of errors committed, frequency and errors common to both groups.
Methodology
The study adopts the qualitative descriptive survey design due to the non-numerical nature of the data used. The study area is Benue State University (BSU), Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria. The population consisted of all master’s degree students’ theses titles and abstracts from the Faculties of Arts and Sciences submitted in 2016. The sample for the study was obtained using the Stratified Random Sampling (SRS) technique. Proportional allocation was done based on departments using Slovin’s formula. A total of fifty theses were then randomly selected: ten from the Sciences and forty from the Arts. Data was obtained or collected from abstracts and titles was employed on the sampled theses. Errors identified were classified in terms of linguistic categories. The identified errors were analysed using frequency distribution and percentages.

Results
Tables 1 and 2 present the frequency distribution of errors committed by master’s degree students from the Faculties of Arts and Sciences with a total number of two hundred and forty five errors.

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Errors in Faculty of Arts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Error</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>History</th>
<th>Religious and Cultural Studies</th>
<th>Linguistics</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morphology</td>
<td>21 (27.3%)</td>
<td>14(25.9%)</td>
<td>4(25.0%)</td>
<td>14 (51.9%)</td>
<td>53 (30.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semantics</td>
<td>2(2.3%)</td>
<td>4(7.4%)</td>
<td>1(6.3%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>7 (4.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthography</td>
<td>11(14.3%)</td>
<td>6(11.1%)</td>
<td>4(25.0%)</td>
<td>6(22.2%)</td>
<td>27 (15.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syntax</td>
<td>21 (27.3%)</td>
<td>24 (44.4%)</td>
<td>1(6.3%)</td>
<td>2 (7.4%)</td>
<td>48 (27.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuation</td>
<td>22 (28.6%)</td>
<td>6(11.1%)</td>
<td>6(37.5%)</td>
<td>5 (18.5%)</td>
<td>39 (22.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Errors in Faculty of Science.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Error</th>
<th>Biology</th>
<th>Physics</th>
<th>Chemistry</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morphology</td>
<td>2(11.1%)</td>
<td>2(14.3%)</td>
<td>11(28.2%)</td>
<td>15 (21.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semantics</td>
<td>0(0.0%)</td>
<td>0(0.0%)</td>
<td>0(0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthography</td>
<td>1 (5.6%)</td>
<td>3(21.4%)</td>
<td>9(23.1%)</td>
<td>13 (18.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syntax</td>
<td>10 (55.6%)</td>
<td>4(28.6%)</td>
<td>12 (30.8%)</td>
<td>26 (36.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuation</td>
<td>5(27.8%)</td>
<td>5(35.7%)</td>
<td>7(17.9%)</td>
<td>17 (23.9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings
The results of the analysis are reported here on the basis of each research question.

**Research Question 1:** What types of error are committed by master’s degree students in their theses titles and abstracts?

The types of errors identified in the theses titles and abstracts were extracted and grouped into five categories: morphology, semantics, orthography, syntax and punctuation.

1. Examples of errors of morphology (essentially use of wrong word forms) include:
   a. …among other devices in treating select themes in their songs.
      Correction: …among other devices in treating selected themes in their songs.
   b. These novels are subjected to analysis using post-colonial feminist theory as the theoretical framework, with a view to highlight the unending quest for survival…
      Correction: These novels are subjected to analysis using post-colonial feminist theory as the theoretical framework, with a view to highlighting the unending quest for survival…
   c. … Black women’s personalities.
      Correction: … Black women personalities.
   d. … improved funding and accountability … enhance teacher motivation and upgrade of existing public institutions.
      Correction: … improved funding and accountability … enhance teacher motivation and upgrading of existing public institutions.
   e. … was studied for 12 months period between July, 2013 to June, 2014.
      Correction: … was studied for 12 months from July, 2013 to June, 2014.
      OR… was studied for a 12-month period, from July, 2013 to June, 2014.

2. Examples of errors of Semantics (particularly words with inapplicable contextual meanings) include:
   a. The researcher has also revealed awareness on the need for the…
      Correction: The researcher has also created awareness on the need for the…
   b. The activities of man on the ecosystem has caused man a lot including…
      Correction: The activities of man on the ecosystem have affected man in many ways, including…
c. The work also espouses (exposes?) the efforts of the various government regimes right from 1960 to revive the local sector.

Correction: The work also highlights or chronicles the efforts of the various government regimes right from 1960 to revive the local sector.

d. Provide suggestions in tackling the challenges they face.

Correction: Provide suggestions in tackling the challenges they face.

e. The whole Christian communion of saints…

Correction: The whole Christian community of saints…

3. Examples of errors of Orthography include:

a. analysed, italicization, characterization, ionizing…

Correction: analysed, italicisation, characterisation, ionising…

b. … and in the process, re-collecting history.

Correction … and in the process, recollecting history.

c. This research is a study of diaspora and discordance in V. S. Naipul’s … A House For Mr. Biswas…

Correction: … for…

d. … A study of Doma Dam, 1973-201”.

Correction: … 2013…

e. This study: An Ecocritical Analysis of selected Nigerian Novels examines ecocritical issues in four Nigerian Novels namely: Oil on Water, The Last Duty, Roses and Bullets and Half of a Yellow Sun.

Correction: Capital letter S in selected, small letter n in Novels and and should not be in italics.

4. Examples of Syntax errors (in terms of poor interpolation, lack of concord, wrong stringing of items in phrases within sentence structure and weak sentence structure) These include:

a. The major contribution of this research to the field is the identification, through the post-colonial theoretical framework the effects of colonialism on the Nigerian nation as reflected in Habila’s works and in the process, re-collecting history.
Correction: *Through the postcolonial theoretical framework, as reflected in Habila’s works, this research majorly contributes to the field by identifying the effects of colonialism on Nigeria and in recollecting its history.*

b. … *human beings’ standard of living* …
   
   Correction: … *standard of living* …

c. It also trained 1620, youths and women *five in basic skills* – tailoring, …
   
   Correction: … *in five basic skills* – tailoring, …

d. *The main motives* behind … Nigeria *was to* …
   
   Correction: *The main motives* behind … Nigeria *were to* …

e. … *the effects of colonialism on the Nigerian nation* as reflected in Habila’s works…
   
   Correction: … *on Nigeria or the nation*…

5. Examples of Punctuation errors include:

a. The cyanide contents of the raw tubers were in the following ranges: TMS 98/0581(41.46-53.40) mg/kg … for all the *Local Government Areas*.
   
   Correction: The cyanide contents of the raw tubers for all the Local Government Areas were in the following ranges: TMS 98/0581(41.46-53.40) mg/kg … .

c. … due to changes in the twenty first Nigerian literary discourse.
   
   Correction: … twenty-first…

d. Heat treatment *however* reduces the cyanide content between *(6.40±0.85 to 27.81±2.65)* mg/kg.
   
   Correction: Heat treatment, *however*, reduces the cyanide content between 6.40±0.85 *to 27.81±2.65*.

e. … artificial meal, plant remains variety of algae…
   
   Correction: … artificial meal, plant remains, variety of algae…

**Research Question 2:** What error has the highest frequency?

At the Faculty level, Table 1 shows that errors in morphology rank highest in the Faculty of Arts with fifty-three occurrences (30.4%). However, Table 2 shows that errors of syntax with twenty-six occurrences (36.6%) are the most frequent error in the Faculty of Sciences. The sum of the Total columns in tables 1 and 2 give the following frequencies 68, 7, 40, 74, 56 in that order. Hence, errors of Syntax have the highest frequency.
Research Question 3: What errors are common to both Science and Arts master’s degree students?

Tables 1 and 2 show that the four categories of errors are common to both groups of students namely errors in morphology, orthography, syntax and punctuation but the most common are errors in punctuation with 22.4% for Arts and 23.9% for the Sciences.

Discussion of Findings
From Table 1, it is quite surprising that the highest percentage of errors committed in the Arts are morphological in nature. It is expected that Arts students, especially English Language and Linguistics, should be proficient in English word formation, relations, and structure. The next in line are errors in syntax and punctuation. The students had problems in sentence structure, word ordering, subject-verb agreement, the use of comma, colon and semi-colon. This shows that both group of students are yet to master the basics of English grammar.

On the other hand, it is not quite surprising that students from the Faculty of Science commit more syntactical errors which concerns the rules, principles and processes that govern sentence structure in a language. As observed by Shaw (2010), students from core sciences like engineering think that writing is not required in their profession and therefore they are not prominent in the image of their culture. This attitude makes them not to pay attention to the rules and principles that govern writing in English language thus resulting in the high percentage of errors in syntax, morphology and punctuation. However, errors in punctuation have 22.4% for the arts and 23.9% for the sciences indicating that postgraduate students at the master’s level commonly experience difficulties in this area.

However, no semantic error was spotted in the thesis abstracts and titles from the Sciences. This is due to the fact that the students’ registers are replete with course-related scientific terms already mastered. Also, the academic writings of the science students are not verbose and flowery like those of their Arts counterparts. Their writings involve more of facts, figures, scientific names, symbols and numbers, thus, making them very straightforward and “hard” (Hartley, 2008). Conversely, semantic errors are committed in the Arts. This is because from the research, it was observed that students from the Faculty of Arts, especially from the Department of History write in a “sprawling” fashion, making use of compound complex sentences. Some of these sentences contain about sixty words hence giving rise to the high percentage of syntactic and morphological errors.

Briefly, ten theses from the Faculty of Sciences and forty from the Faculty of Arts were used for the research. A total of two hundred and forty-five errors were observed: seventy-one from the sciences and a hundred and seventy-four from the arts giving a ratio of 71:10 and 174:40 respectively. This means that a typical thesis from the Faculty of Sciences had approximately seven (7) errors while that of Arts stood at 4. Thus, it is imperative that the science students should be more serious with English courses such as “Use of English” or “Communication in English”, as the case may be.
Conclusion and Recommendations

This research sets out to investigate the types of errors committed by postgraduate master’s degree Arts and Science students as found in their theses titles and abstracts. It was discovered that these students commit errors in morphology, semantics, syntax, orthography and punctuation. They share common grounds in punctuation errors. The most frequently committed error was that of morphology in the Arts and syntax in the Sciences with morphology ranking first across board. No semantic error was identified in the theses of the science as a result of disciplinary influence. It was discovered that postgraduate students are not immune from linguistic errors in their academic writings. Therefore, the university and other tertiary institutions should appraise the effectiveness of English courses taught, materials used, methods employed and other teacher-related factors. In addition, given the global nature of English language, the science students should be given a re-orientation on the importance of the language both in their academics and careers. Students from the arts, especially English and Linguistics, should not rest on their oars. They should press on to a higher level of English language proficiency as professionals.

References


