

## AN ANALYTICAL COMMENTARY ON SOME TELLING GRAMMATICAL ERRORS ON SOME FREQUENCY MODULATION STATIONS IN KUMASI, GHANA

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper presents evidence of some serious grammatical aberrations on several of the Frequency Modulation Stations (FM) in the Kumasi Metropolis. The paper argues that owing to the power of the electronic media, constant repetition of grammatical aberrations tend to exert a negative effect on learners, especially, the impressionable young ones. Some ways to tackle this sickening waywardness in the use of English have been suggested and attention drawn to the very sanctity of the word, as postulated, at least for our purposes, in John's proclamation (1984).*

*In the beginning was the Word,  
And the Word was with God,  
And the Word was God.*

*This paper's position, therefore, is that the fact of the Word being God attests to its very sanctity and the compelling need to avoid too many abusages and vulgarisms.*

**Keywords:** Word, linguistics, grammar, literacy, vulgarism.

### INTRODUCTION

The standard of English in Ghana is fast deteriorating and this forces on us all, especially teachers of the language, the imperative need to help arrest the situation, in spite of our own limitations.

This work's genesis came up before the Kapital Radio in Kumasi said at exactly 7.53a.m. on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September, 2001 that "As presenters you are supposed to be role models ...". Role models they should necessarily be because that is what

society expects of them. Unfortunately, not many would accept the argument that they also have to be good teachers of grammar.

There seems to be no modulating influence on some presenters who have run riot with the use of language, here, the English Language. It cannot be their fault; it is only an attempt to reach and use acceptable standard models, that is Target English models. However, it is necessary to correct some of the errors.

It seems that present-day learners are not particularly enthused over the tediousness of prescriptive grammar but the violations of the rules

of grammar produced here nourish the necessity to be somehow prescriptive in the teaching and learning of the English Language.

We have provided the exact time and date for every abusage recorded here, and we aver that they are absolutely exact and true.

We must also note that although one may be tempted to see any one abusage generally analysed here as a solecism, we wish to warn that when a solecism is not deprecated, its constant use could impose docile acceptance and thereby help concretise illiteracy and vulgarism.

The ultimate objective of this presentation therefore is to positively sensitise those slovenly users of the English Language on air to the fact that the journalistic policy of educating people is not a mere matter of presenting things, as Shaw (1969) would say, in the fashion of "an incompetent, drivelling, snivelling, gibbering, jabbering, idiot" of a presenter.

Bad English is a monster that must be decapitated. The message must certainly be sauced with good grammar.

**MISGRASPING AND MALAPROPISM**

Misgrasping often leads to malapropism which is a reference to the wrong use of words which have similar sounds or pronunciation. It is something easily imbibed by non-native speakers of any language and largely, this has got to do with words that, for example, rhyme in poetry. While the native speaker of English uses words without necessarily thinking of their connotations and denotations, the non-native speaker generally labours to construct sentences, hence, any usage close to their target is easily grasped. For example, since the words "neatness, greatness, weakness and greediness" are identical in structure, each would seem to fit into a particular sentence structure. Thus, it might not sound absurd and indefensible for Kapital Radio to say "--- be-

cause of the greediness of --- (8.45a.m. 12/1/01)" since we can say,

(greatness)  
because of the (neatness)  
of ---  
(weakness)

It seems the vulgarism in the use of "greediness", a word which is non-existent in English, can only be seen by the informed native speaker but not even the educated non-native user of English without linguistic intelligence can. So, the incorrect "--- because of the greediness of ---" may pass unnoticed as an aberration thereby serving as a veritable conduit pipe for churning out such a weird construction as "--- because of the sorrowness of his wife ---".

As learners, especially at the pre-university levels, repeatedly dabble in such abusages they become almost inscrutably glued to them and see gold in anything that glitters.

It appears that among second language learners meaning is often sacrificed once a particular word which sounds similar to another word has been used repeatedly and thereby become acceptable to careless users of the language. Hence, with understandable but poor abandon, too many presenters and students alike say and write "--- with regards to ---" (poorly formed on the analogy of --- as regards ---). (Luv FM. 29/8/01 - 6.45 am; Capital Radio, 29/8/01 - 7.20pm). And, if a radio station can say "--- a warning shoot", why would it be indefensible for the Garden City Radio to say "--- a lose (or loose?) would be disastrous? (26/8/01 - 3.55pm).

Modern-day abusers of the English Language sometimes go intolerably too far. They tend to raise their language to a rather high-falutin level thereby becoming grotesque and tedious. Indeed

Sheridan's Mrs. Malaprop would be surprised at the creativity of her siblings who engage in unchecked linguistic freedom.

During the research, this writer was asked a very significant question by a Senior Secondary School student:

Please, Sir, is it correct? Anonymous?

The Kapital Radio that day 22/11/01 at 7.30am had said,

The Supreme Court --- anonymous decision ---

Much earlier, on 1/12/98 at 9.51 am, the same radio station had said,

He won by anonymous points decision ---

The problem here is the confusion created by the malapropism and, worse, the sick notion among most immature learners that only the best English appears in the press. So, the word "anonymous" freely installs itself, as it were, in the seat of "unanimous". And the presenter was not joking when he said twice in a minute

He was adjourned the best student ---  
(Fox FM 1/10/01 = 8 am)

Nor was the same station joking again in the following instances:

(a) Talking about fake foods and drugs on the market the station said

"--- have not been satisfied ---" instead of "certified"

(b) "--- well vested ---" instead of "well versed" and

(c) "--- very resound lawyer ---" probably "renowned".

## PLURALISATION

This researcher knows from several years of teaching the English Language at all levels of Ghanaian education that pluralisation of English nouns does not present many problems to educated Ghanaians. Many educated Ghanaians

know that most English nouns take the "---s" and "---es" sibilant suffixes to form their plurals. One recurring error, however, is the tendency to add the "---s" to both noun elements in such recurrent compound nouns as "Head of State" and "Head of Department".

Thus, even on university notice boards we see such a pluralisation as "Heads of Departments ---" and then "Heads of States" in most Ghanaian newspapers.

The source of this error appears to be the de-emphasising of the teaching of prescriptive or, say, traditional grammar. We ignore the rules and acquire the English Language mostly through the reading of material which does not necessarily teach the rudiments of the language. Hence, in the two examples above speakers add the "---s" to both elements just because "---s" and "---es" are added to nouns to form plurals! But the correct rule, as shown by Zandvoort (1975), is that in pluralizing a compound noun, where the compound has the structure "Noun + Prepositional Adjunct" the sibilant suffix is added to the first word. The same rule applies where we have, in a compound, a noun followed by an adverbial particle. Hence we have "Heads of Department" but never "Heads of Departments"; "Heads of State" not "Heads of States" and "Passers-by" not "Passers-bys" or "Passer-bys".

As already indicated the use of "---s" and "---es" presents little difficulty to Ghanaian learners. However, not many do observe the fact that nouns form their plurals in other ways. Let us look at the following pluralisations by some radio stations:

(a) --- a criteria (Luv FM, 7.45 am)  
23/1/98;

(b) It has as its agenda (one item)  
GCR-GBC News - 7.00am  
26/11/98;

- (c) Due to the arrival of their new equipments ---  
(Luv FM, 6.50am – 29/8/01);
- (d) A national service personnel was lynched ---  
(Kapital Radio – 7.25 am – 20/8/01);
- (e) --- who turned himself into a GPRTU  
personnel --- (Kapital Radio 7.57 am –  
22/8/01
- (f) --- Accra Sports Stadia --- (G.C.R., 12.20p.m.  
- 20/6/01, referring to the infamous May 9  
Accra Sports Stadium disaster)

While errors (a) and (f) could be excused and easily corrected, the rest, especially the use of the word “personnel” seem to be fixed errors unfortunately thought to be correct. So much has the word “personnel” been wrongly used that too many students leave Ghanaian high schools and universities still glued to the error and thus very often say and write,

As a future national service personnel ---

It is not very clear what the source of this persistent error is. Perhaps it is a mark of sheer indolence on the part of educated persons, for the word “personnel” can never take the singular form of the verb “to be”, since it is plural. Names such as “National Service Person”, “National Servant”, “National Serviceman” and “National Service woman” are suggested as appropriate designations. Then also the noun “equipment” belongs to English nouns like “furniture” which have no plural forms but form their plurals with the help of attributive adjuncts. The radio station was therefore wrong to have added the “---s” sibilant suffix to miseducate learners.

**RAMBLING CONSTRUCTIONS**

There is a compelling necessity for order in sentence construction in English. In fact, because the English Language has very few inflectional endings, poor ordering of words could create

serious semantic problems and Partridge [1964] affirms this by stating that “--- the habits of word-order are stronger than the habits of inflection” in English. The absolute importance of word-order is seen in the following oft-quoted illustration. In Latin,

Canis vidit felem

could be the same as

Felem vidit canis.

In English these two sentences would read as follows:

The cat saw the dog.

and

The dog saw the cat.

In the English instances, the shifts in the positions of the subjects and objects change meanings.

The Ghana Education Commission, in a report entitled Addressing Problems in Language and Communication Skills in Education (1996), commented on English Language in a Ghanaian university as follows:

Some sentences appeared absolutely absurd, while others were rambling constructions which bordered on illiteracy.

Apparently, some slovenly students have developed a strange, carefree attitude in their study of the language; thus, there is no conscious effort to study the syntax and semantics of the language. This attitude reminds this researcher about an encounter with three teenage students at a drinking bar during this research. When an elderly man attempted to stop them from consuming strong alcohol, one of them retorted.

We learn in Economics that one must satisfy his wants and we are satisfying our wants!

They seemed right in their laissez-faire attitude,

just as right as those who accept as absolutely true and adequate the BBC English Dictionary's (1992) definition of a sentence as

--- a group of words which, when written down, begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop.

The lazy would go by this inadequate definition and simplistically say that a good sentence has been constructed in so far as something is communicated by the grouping of certain words.

Perhaps, the reliable BBC English Dictionary should have spoon-fed lazy learners by adding that although a single word can be a sentence as in "Go!" "Shoot!" et cetera, when one constructs a sentence with more than one word, the group of words should in the last analysis have an intelligible purpose. In other words, the words should be so grouped as to be meaningful. Thus, contrary to the BBC English Dictionary definition of the word, a sentence does not merely "begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop".

It would appear therefore that the producers of the following scandalous and rambling constructions belong to the uncanny and rather *laissez-faire* school of thought, that is, the total denouncers of prescriptive grammar.

- (a) Students who fail to write the exams will be at your own risk.  
(G.C.R. 1.00p.m. – 7/8/01);
- (b) Anybody who maltreats a child constitute child abuse  
(G.C.R. 3.35p.m. – 22/12/98)
- (c) --- airlines declared to be a bankruptcy  
(G.C.R. – G.B.C. – 6.13am – 7/11/01)
- (d) --- the disbursement of the two billion cedis could not be disbursed  
(Fox FM, 7.20am – 2/10/01);
- (e) --- they decided to postpone the match to

the Accra Stadium  
(Luv FM, 5.52p.m – 26/9/01);

- (f) The Ghana Armed Forces has denied that no ex-servicemen have been detained.  
(G.C.R. – G.B.C., 6am news, 27/9/01);
- (g) --- helped in the mismanagement of the colossal lapse of the bank  
(Fox FM, 9am – 29/10/01)

We must say, as regards the (f) wrong construction above, that the opposite sense was actually meant by the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation. It is a norm among Ghanaians, educated and uneducated alike, to freely lace their utterances with corrupted English words. Thus, we may come across such an Akan construction as

Odenayee se wambono

which would be literally translated by the ambitious semi-educated person as follows:

He denied that he did not beat her

when in fact they mean

He denied that he beat her.

Obviously, these are a grammatical, syntactic, or semantic morass out of which we must find our way. But how?

#### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is necessary to recognise the power of the word. Indeed, Partridge (1964) again very succinctly postulates the power of the word, (something we have already readily acknowledged in this work), that words, "like persons --- cannot always be taken for granted". Partridge adds, and again we hold this to be true, that words are very much tougher than warriors, tougher even than women. Hence, the study of words should not remain as perfunctory as it is at the moment in Ghana.

This researcher has not been left in any doubt at all that the *sine qua non* of successful private

broadcast journalism is profit-making which in itself is admittedly not a fault. It is approved by Capitalism.

Indeed, Denkabi *et al* (1997) report after their indepth research into the poor state of health (as we should say) of the English Language in the Ghanaian press that some journalists (strangely) subscribe to the idea that "language is subordinate to message" probably in so far as such a subordination increases profits. For such people, according to Denkabi *et al.* (1997). "Grammar should be considered only if the target is scholarly". But such a view cannot be accepted by any tolerably educated person because of the silent but real deleterious effect of ungrammatical English on young learners who are understandably gullible.

However, we dare not joke with words, for, the more jocular we are with language in serious academic endeavours the more we are likely to churn out pseudo-graduates.

What is happening is that most radio stations have chosen to flourish on "voice competence" especially as shown in a rapid rendering, what is generally known as "rapping" or "raps". What therefore should be the vehicle for presentations, that is, good grammar, is not germane to their business purposes.

They are not to blame. There is an inexplicably bizarre attitude toward the study of language, especially the English Language, at the pre-tertiary levels of Ghanaian education. Too many of our second cycle students hold the view that language is something one does not have to waste time learning. This disturbing lapse flies forcefully in the face of concerns about the ever deteriorating standard of English, alas, even in the language's own United Kingdom, a sad situation I.K. Gyasi silently but justifiably bemoans in an article published in the newspaper "The Ghanaian Chronicle" of November 4, 1996. The standard of English had fallen in Britain, apparently because unqualified teachers,

(like our mostly unqualified presenters), taught English; in fact, as much as twenty-eight percent of the teachers of English held just the General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level!

This same sad situation in Ghana is not helped at all by the world's ever growing technological and scientific sophistication. Our part of the world seems to have misgrasped the essence of this advancement and so has consequently slipped into an unacceptable indolence. We are inextricably caught in the narrow circuit of a world in which "short cuts" to nearly everything are preferred to tedious but productive means in virtually all our endeavours. The televisions, radios, cinemas and now the mobile phones among others have usurped our reading habits and students would prefer to watch films on books to reading the books themselves. The English Language in Ghana, therefore, now reels agonisingly under the tyranny of induced indolence.

The Frequency Modulation Stations can definitely be helped to help us all. Although the idea of establishing language laboratories may be frowned upon by some radio stations such laboratories can be of tremendous help if subsumed in those organisations. However, if such laboratories would siphon off too much of their profits, simple language offices equipped with computers and manned by language experts from the universities and other language institutions are suggested. Their major role would be to dissect all presentations on their stations and assist presenters and others at internally organised seminars and workshops for all personnel of the stations. Such an interventionist approach should not be considered a financial drain as it would definitely be an invaluable contribution to qualitative national development.

Finally, it is necessary that government allows the concerns of those who care about the ever falling standard of English in Ghana to shape

language policies and national attitudes.

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