

## THE PRINTER'S DEVIL AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE INFRACTIONS IN THE GHANAIAN PRINT MEDIA

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Our study is on English Language infractions, particularly, grammatical absurdities, unacceptably blamed on an ogre named the Printer's Devil by journalists. It is a sequel to an earlier article, AN ANALYTICAL COMMENTARY ON SOME TELLING GRAMMATICAL ERRORS ON SOME FREQUENCY MODULATION STATIONS IN KUMASI, GHANA. The paper forms part of an ongoing research into "Street Language and its effect on Educated Ghanaian English". Here, we present the way some of our journalists sloppily handle the English Language, subjugating good language and grammar to message while dangerously appearing oblivious of the effect of what they write on readers, especially students in tertiary institutions who may be good readers, and who often have to depend on newspapers as sources of information in their research activities. Although our aim in this research endeavour is to see by how much the English Language in Ghana is being nativised, we suggest that journalese or technicalese cannot mean deliberate or careless jettisoning of grammatical norms. The archetypal Printer's Devil should not be made to bear the brunt of the journalist's grammatical inadequacies.*

**Keywords:** *grammatical infractions, journalists, printer's devil, language.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Journalists are important because whatever they say and write are of enormous significance since language is principally learned through listening and reading. Grammatical errors and linguistic aberrations heard or read consistently tend to paste themselves on the minds of learners whose communicative skills are thereby negatively affected. Journalists have been quite vociferous

in the last decade about their claim to the status of the fourth estate of the realm, a claim society obviously approves and which therefore imposes on them the responsibility to handle well their most basic tool, which is language. Again, as most journalists agree, and as noted by Denkabi *et al* (1996), "...the press serves as a model and has to raise standards even in an environment where standards may be falling." Thus, for us as teach-

ers of English, the way journalists handle the language is of great interest. Such an interest is shown by Partridge (1964) when he writes that "C.C. Boyd ... quotes from a newspaper the expression: 'For the enlargement of the activity of his department Mr N. Chamberlain...' and points out that 'you do not *enlarge* an activity you *increase* it.'" The word *enlarge* is wrongly used here; but appearing in a newspaper and being almost synonymous with *increase*, second language learners are unlikely to detect the error. Hough (1984) warns that "the right word communicates – the wrong word fails to communicate" and adds that the wrong word "may also mark the writer as careless or illiterate or both." Consequently, Hough tells journalists that they "can't always depend on others to tell" them "what is right or wrong with their writing, what is euphonious or discordant." But although we cannot teach journalists their trade we are inclined to side with Hough's contention that "Good writing is an art. The good writer is an artist who knows the language and is able to manipulate it for a desired effect."

However, journalists are noted for passing the buck, often in matters of grammatical absurdities. The convenience and speed with which they blame the poor Printer's Devil when their own grammatical infractions are highlighted tends to negatively portray them as pompous. It did not surprise us therefore that when we produced some of their errors for publication in *The Mirror* newspaper, the article appeared under the title, *Blame the mistakes on the Printer's Devil* in that paper's edition of August 20, 1994. Apparently in reaction to that title and content, I.K. Gyasi, a grammarian, produced an article in *The Ghanaian Chronicle* newspaper of November 4, 1996 appropriately titled, IS IT THE PRINTER'S DEVIL? He too observes the point we have already made that journalists are often too pious to accept responsibility for their grammatical and linguistic aberrations, and even improper punctuations, when he writes, "Media people routinely blame the errors they make on an *ogre* they describe as the 'printer's devil.'"

Etymologically, the Printer's Devil was no more than an errand (not necessarily an arrant) boy who, at the incipient stages of printing technology, had the arduous duty of carrying about printed sheets within press houses; and who, in the process, almost invariably so blackened himself that the workmen called him a devil. This tag is not surprising since some religions choose to see the devil as black! It is this devil that present-day journalists unjustifiably refuse to grant their right to die! The journalists would probably ask us to look at an English Language book for senior secondary schools in which the printer's devil made some authors with impressive academic credentials to teach students that *shaken* is the past tense of *shake*, making the students to conclude that *shook* is the past participle of *shake*!

Yet, it might be misleading to suggest that poor proof-reading and sheer carelessness are the only reasons for language misuse in the print media, though that is what this paper appears to suggest. Indeed we need to consider, too, the linguistic environment within which journalists work and also the review processes reports and articles pass through before the final publication.

The English language is not native to Ghana, and for that matter English-speaking West Africa. Therefore, our journalists are necessarily bilingual. Owing to this fact, the influence or interference of the native languages in the use of the English language in the print media cannot be discounted. Journalists deal directly with the people and this often makes necessary the tailoring of their language to suit the various segments of society. Indeed, street language or popular speech is the primary source of the journalist's written language. Journalists grasp peculiar linguistic expressions from such ordinary places as the sports stadia, markets, police stations and from such activities as politics and entertainment. Such sources have their own linguistic tendencies which may influence use of the English language. We found during our interactions with journalists, some of them students, that when some journalists write they normally have in focus a wide vari-

ety of not-so-well-educated readership and so they tend to shape and present their message to suit that majority and not necessarily the so-called well-educated few. That is why they would subordinate language to message. Thus, for the journalist, in so far as the language used is understood by their popular readership so-called good grammar, syntax and punctuation among others is not very important. This, for example, may be the reason for the following rather highfalutin declaration by a Ghanaian sports commentator: "The match at the irresistible Obuasi Sports Stadium cannot match the Accra Sports Stadium conflagration!" Obviously, that commentator deliberately sought to enrich his language in order to satisfy his audience. Likewise, sports papers and some other tabloids would target a readership which is not very literate. Thus, their press houses may not concern themselves with such vital things as dictionaries and thesauruses since the journalists are able to reach their readership by using their own personal styles. Even where style books are made available some journalists may prefer to use their own personal styles. Although this is permissible it may be one of the factors responsible for much of the deviance in English language usage in our newspapers.

Finally, the phenomenon called the printer's devil is also traceable to the review processes before publication of reports and articles. It is not that journalists are absolutely insensitive to good standards. Aside the job being strenuous journalists are almost always in haste to have their articles published. Tension is therefore their bane, hence some of the errors. Yet, copy-editing is done even after the author, to ensure accuracy, has made the necessary corrections. Errors in fact and style, poor syntax and misspelling are corrected through copy-editing. But poor gate-keeping and unskilful typing even where there are sophisticated electronic gadgets such as Video Display Terminals, might allow errors to slip through. This is worse where (as with most tabloids) one person may be pub-

lisher, editor and reporter at the same time. Such an individual may not be able to detect his or her own grammatical infelicities and biases. Usually copy-editing is done in copy-pencil where the errors occur. Copy is then sent to the typist. If the typist happens to be the ill-trained or the sloppy type then some of the marked errors would be overlooked and therefore not eliminated. Nonetheless, the experienced writer would normally be expected to peruse copy for typing errors, spelling mistakes and poor syntax or usage among others before submitting copy to the editor for final printing. This is often not done, especially when there is no time. For want of time therefore the writer is compelled to hustle copy, with all its infelicities, to the copy desk.

The above notwithstanding, we can say that some journalists simply lack linguistic intelligence. This is often due to poor academic backgrounds. Most private papers, because of financial reasons, employ people who lack competent language skills or whose knowledge of journalism is scanty. In most cases those employees dabble in linguistic showmanship and wordiness which may lead to garbled copies and also account for the prominence of the printer's devil in the print media. Consequently, we side with Hough (1984) that "news writers who read their own copy and editors and copy readers who review it after them can eliminate redundancies, substitute specific words for vague ones, find short words to replace long ones, substitute single words for whole phrases, straighten awkward sentences, clear up ambiguities and explain jargon and gobbledygook."

#### **Discussion of some of the decay**

In *The Ghanaian Chronicle* of February, 20-27, 1994, a reader wrote to tell the editor that it was incorrect to begin a sentence with what he called "a joining word," by which he meant "a coordinating conjunction." Unfortunately, the editor allowed the afore-mentioned Printer's Devil to prevent him from educating the reader and us all that it is possible to begin a sentence with a co-

ordinating conjunction – “And Jesus wept.” That reader and many like him were denied the chance to correct a linguistic fallacy.

Let us be even more specific to see what havoc the Printer's Devil has been inflicting on our editors and their readers. This devil slipped a malapropism into the *Daily Graphic* of March 18, 1994 and *The Ghanaian Chronicle* of May 5, 1994. The *Daily Graphic* wrote “**Resulting** to the threats of blackouts is not one of the mechanisms we employ to resolve our differences.” In *The Statesman* of February 13-14, 2006, the following sentence appeared: “At the weekend the woman refused to pick up her phone but media sources have confirmed that she has **resulted** to using media personnel to frighten the MP.” Again, according to the *Hearts News* of April 13, 2006, “The Beninois, who could not stand the aggressiveness of the Phobians **resulted** to rough play ...” And, can we imagine the effect on the young learner if they should read the following two sentences produced on different dates by *The Hearts News*: “Striker Reuben Senyo who was the lone man upfront for the Phobians was also causing havoc to the Etoile defence who **retorted** to fouling him...” (May 9, 2006); “With the Phobians dictating the pace for their arch rivals, Kotoko **retorted** to rough tackles...” (May 30, 2006)?

It was also the same Printer's Devil who made *The Ghanaian Chronicle* of May 5, 1994 to say, “By the way, the killing of the three judges and one Major and the revelations in the SIB investigations **goes** to debunk Assisseh's **related** attempt to exonerate Rawlings in the blood-bath.” It also deceived *The Ghanaian Times* recently into saying that “The Bawku Boys, a notorious gangster group made up of youth of predominantly northern **attraction** gave the police on duty at the conference venue, a hectic time.” (December 24, 2005) We will talk about the use of **goes** instead of **go** later. But, clearly, the Printer's Devil had confused the journalists to believe that **resulting**, **retorted**, **related** and **attraction** are synonyms of **resorting**, **resorted**,

**belated** and **extraction** respectively!

Indeed, it must have been the Printer's Devil who distorted communication by making the proof readers of a sporting tabloid, *The Phobian*, to produce such an absurd sentence as: “His confidence **exhumed** when the going got tough”, (December 2, 1992), as if his confidence had died and been buried! Was it also not this same Printer's Devil who slipped the word **damages** into the *Daily Graphic* of March 25, 1994: “The Assin Fosu Magistrate Court has granted permission...to settle out of court the case involving eight persons charged with rioting and causing **damages** to property...”; and again made the *Daily Guide* to write, “They broke the windscreen and suffered other **damages**”? (January 26, 2004) The Printer's Devil seems to think that **damages**, what a court of law awards a person whose image or property, for example, has been damaged, is the plural of **damage**. The two words are semantically and mutually exclusive. It is like the abstract noun **advice** whose plural is never **advices**: “So for all these years, these are the kind of **advices** that Assiseh has been whispering into...” (*The Ghanaian Chronicle* May 5, 1994).

Although every language has its own unique spelling system, the Printer's Devil callously fooled *The Mirror* into thinking that there is no difference between British and American English. On April 30, 1994, *The Mirror* wrote: “I have not taken the compensation yet because I want to seek your **advise** first”; “On the other hand, if he refuses to listen to either you or your mother, then my **advise is** to break up the relationship...” If the Printer's Devil can be consistently American then the two sentences are correct, for in American English, **advise** is both a noun and a verb. British English has **advice** as a noun and **advise** as a verb. In the two sentences above, therefore, we would have **advice** rather than **advise** since the word occupies the position of a noun in both sentences.

The Printer's Devil is sometimes uncomfortably slipshod, especially, as regards transitive and in-

transitive verbs. It also appears oblivious of the grammatical truism that not all verbs take prepositions to make their meanings. Let us look at the following examples:

- a) However, its MTTU commander, Mr X, **assured that** the class of the driving licence the driver was using would be established ...(*Daily Guide, September 15, 2005*).
- b) When contacted, the Ashanti Regional Crime Officer **assured that** the police would partner the military in investigating the matter. (*Daily Guide, April 28, 2005*)
- c) The Accra Polytechnic last Friday **awarded** twenty six workers who have contributed in diverse ways to the success and growth of the institution over the years. (*Daily Graphic, December 19, 2005*).
- d) Seven retired staff ... were also **awarded**. (*The Ghanaian Times, December 24, 2005*).
- e) **Advocating for** place ... (*The Ghanaian Times, December 24, 2005*).
- f) He therefore encouraged everyone to **voice out** everything from their 'chest'. (*Daily Guide, November 9, 2005*).

In simple terms, if a verb is transitive it needs an object to be meaningful; and if it is intransitive it does not need an object. The verbs **assure** and **award** are transitive verbs and therefore without objects they cannot be meaningful. In the print media and on air, these two words are very often abused in usage. In example *a* above, the MTTU commander gave the assurance to somebody or some people and the verb is incomplete in meaning if this fact is not clearly indicated. Thus, we can say, for example, "the commander **assured the press** that ...." In our example *b*, the crime officer might have **assured the public that**... Similarly, it is not clear **what** were **awarded** to the twenty six workers and the retired staff in examples *c* and *d*. Those things **awarded** them must definitely be stated if the verb is to be meaningful and the sentences intelligible. Then also, we **advocate something**, we never **advocate for something**; nor do we **voice out something**, we **voice something**. In other words, the

two verbs **advocate** and **voice**, do not require prepositions to be meaningful. Thus, we would say, for example, "The party is **advocating** the dismissal of the minister" and, in the second instance, "The students **voiced** their opinions when they met the Vice Chancellor."

### Concord

Admittedly, there are some exceptions to the rules of concord and so it is possible for some plural nouns to go with some singular verbal predicates. Usually, in such cases, the noun, that is, the subject, is plural only in form but denotes a singular idea. It is what is called "notional concord," defined by Quirk *et al* (1974), as "... agreement of verb with subject according to the *idea* of number rather than the actual presence of the grammatical marker for that idea". Indeed, Zandvoort (1975) gives us this example – "Draughts is entirely a game of mathematical calculation." Here, the subject, "draughts," is a singular noun though it ends with the "-s of the plural inflection." But it is able to take the singular verb, *is*, because in terms of number it is considered singular.

It appears, however, that the Printer's Devil is inscrutably linked to colloquial English in which, for example, a plural subject could freely go with a singular verbal predicate. Although it is not strictly observed in English, we need to keep it in mind that a plural subject requires a plural verbal predicate. Otherwise, we would be teaching our students to say and write, "...the **revelations** in the SIB investigations **goes**..."; "The likes of these people throw/overboard all the respectable **norms** that **has** come to nurture the moral fibre of..."; (*Free Press, May 26, 1994*) "...there are **ranks and positions** which **makes** frog-leaping from..."; (*Free Press, May 26, 1994*) "**Such moves** are politically not sound and **does** not augur well for the process of finding a lasting solution to the ethnic conflict"; (*The Ghanaian Chronicle* May 12, 1994) "**The necessary contacts** by all concerned groups especially directors **has** become imperative"(*The Phobian, March 24, 1993*); "Petre Gavrilu **have** proved his mettle..." (*The*

*Phobian*, October 7, 1992); "Salifu's **adroitness and experience has** not been in doubt and his services for the nation has become imperative **now than ever**" (*The Phobian*, December 2, 1992). The word **more** should have been inserted between 'become' and 'imperative' to show comparison. And is there any concord of tense in the following sentence "...when did the president **doled** out handsome slaps...?" (*The Ghanaian Voice*, May 18, 1994)

Many errors such as those above seem to spring from poor proof-reading and carelessness which are then blamed on the Printer's Devil. That notwithstanding, we need to point out that given the shocking nature of some of the examples of misuse some other factors may also be responsible for the deviance. Such factors may include influences and interferences from our native tongues, misgrasping of acceptable usage of certain words and phrases and even the gradual de-emphasising of the teaching of prescriptive grammar at all levels of Ghanaian education. Also, some of the errors seem to be the result of wrong ideas of correctness. The reason for this phenomenon may be the honest desire of non-native users of the English language to attain such linguistic competence as obtains in the so-called Standard English usage. Nonetheless, it is this paper's position that most of the errors are due to carelessness and so there is the need of caution on the part of reporters and editors.

## CONCLUSION

As non-native users of the English Language, we need to observe the rules or norms of the language in order to communicate effectively. That is to say, we cannot use the language meaningfully without making a conscious effort to learn how it works in speech and writing. We are bilingual and our native tongues definitely influence performance in our second language. This paper's argument is that the English Language has not been well in the Ghanaian print media for some time now and this is very worrying because, by the nature of their job, journalists

are teachers and what they write is read by learners who may be influenced by what they read.

Interestingly, our editors are not unaware of the bad grammar and syntax some journalists write. In fact, according to Hough (1984) "some able reporters write only passably well but are excused because of their special talents as reporters." This ideology of "excusing" the linguistic incompetence of reporters, "because of their special talents as reporters," really means that to most editors the important thing is "the message" but not "the medium." Editors are therefore culpable, for, they kill the need for proper proof-reading of reports and articles. This attitude has been condemned by at least one columnist of the tabloid, *Ghana Palaver*, in the edition of December 2, 2003:

*Proof-reading is a big problem in the publishing industry. We do not take proof-reading seriously because we think we can always attribute mistakes to the printer's devil. But the printer's devil is now tired of being always accused for typographical mistakes and the like. It needs a breather! Every standard newspaper must have excellent proof, (sic) otherwise it loses its ranking in the eyes of readers.*

This is a welcome self-introspection but one national newspaper, *The Ghanaian Times*, interviewed by Denkabi et al (1997), was rather ambivalent: "...many people learning English do not use newspapers, for if they did their language would be very bad," a view obviated by one journalist who, according to Denkabi et al, said that "...in a country such as ours where educational resources are scarce, people consider the newspaper as a textbook of a kind." Newspapers are indeed textbooks and we find that Partridge (1964) is therefore infinitely right when he cautions writers against wooliness, that fault of style which is the consequence of a multiplicity of factors including carelessness and sometimes ignorance. Improper proof-reading may lead to haziness or ambiguities and negatively influence young read-

ers in their studies and use of the language. Indeed, even though Partridge admits the enormous difficulty in attaining the ideal, he advises that, "the ideal to which a writer should aim ... is that he write so clearly, so precisely, so unambiguously, that his words can bear only one meaning to all averagely intelligent readers that possess an average knowledge of the language used." If journalists could be mindful of this, most errors would be avoided in print.

Consequently, our position, in the final analysis, is that journalists need to be more scrupulous in their use of the English Language. Pushing the blame persistently on the hapless Printer's Devil only betrays the journalist as either incompetent or simply incorrigible; and readers, especially students in their impressionable years, are the unfortunate victims.

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