Phraseology in New Englishes: Focus on Some Verbs and Preposition Agreement in Cameroon English

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Abstract

This study examines the use of some verbs and prepositions by ESL learners in Cameroon in order to corroborate and ascertain the linguistic peculiarity of Cameroon English as far as this linguistic phenomenon is concerned. 85 university students were given a test involving gap test task (GTT), a multiple choice comprehension task (MCCT) and correction of individual sentence task (CIST) with a verb that requires or does not require a preposition after it. The results show that communicational redundant prepositions, which are supposed to be omitted, do occur in the learners' grammar as learners employ varied prepositions in null-preposition construction after a verb. The results further show that null-preposition construction occurs after the verb, in the learners' language, in situations where a preposition is required to express a complete thought; and also, prepositions which agree with certain verbs are variedly substituted for other prepositions without taking into consideration the syntactic and semantic features of the message to be conveyed. The changes inscribed in the way these verbs and prepositions are used are products of realities in new language speaking context such as Cameroon.

Keywords: Cameroon English, ESL, Phraseology, Preposition, Verbs

1. Introduction

One of the major characteristics of English in the non-native settings is that it exists alongside indigenous languages and most people, who study English here, come to the language classroom with knowledge of at least an L1.

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Because the rhetorical structure of the L1 of these learners is not the same as that of the English language, what is written and spoken in these settings often exhibits features that do not meet the expectations of a typical native mind. The consistent nature of these feature specifications gives the English language that springs up its peculiarity.

This reveals that English is not only viewed as a useful "international" language, but it also fulfills important local functions. In doing so, it has developed local forms and characteristics, so that not infrequently people enjoy using it in "their own" way. In many places local ways of speaking English have become a new home dialect which, like all local dialects, is used to express regional pride, a sense of belonging to a place which finds expression through local culture, including language forms (Schneider, 2011). Thus, there is unanimous agreement that the English language has been undergoing complex processes of acculturation in many former British colonies which have retained the English language after independence (Kachru, 2005). In the course of these processes, "English has been appropriated by its non-European users and changed to reflect their own experiences" (Mair, 2008:235). An integral part of the processes of acculturation are linguistic changes, with new and innovative forms and structures emerging at the level of vocabulary and syntax (e.g. due to loanwords and transfer from local languages as well as other languages surrounding the acquisition of English in these settings) and new norms evolving in phonology and intonation (e.g. with regard to the range of consonant clusters and intonation contours). These new features are produced, fossilised, and normalised within the sociolinguistic norms. The linguistic changes can be subsumed under the notion of structural nativisation, i.e. "the emergence of locally characteristic linguistic patterns" (Schneider, 2007:5-6).

Cameroon is not an exception to this. Being a multilingual country wherein 286 indigenous languages co-exist side-by-side with two official languages (French and English) and a number of lingua francas (Pidgin English, Arab Choa, Fulfulde, Mongo Ewodo etc), it is evident that linguistic borrowing, interference, code-mixing, loan translation and other manifestations of language contact phenomena are abound in the English spoken in Cameroon.   The blend of these language contact phenomena, in the English spoken in Cameroon, gives it its peculiarity as one of the World Englishes.

The peculiarity and efforts made so far to describe Cameroon English (Mbangwana, 1999; Echu, 2003; Kouega, 2005; Nkemleke, 2006); Simo Bobda, 2009, 2010; Epoge, 2012) reveal that Cameroonians tend to speak English in slightly different ways and with varying degrees of fluency and accuracy, depending on what part of the country they come from and on the level and type of formal education they have received.

This is in line with Schneider's (2011:2) assertion that "English is no longer just 'one language'; it comes in many different shapes and sizes, as it were. It is quite different in the many countries and localities where it has been adopted".

It is healthy to point out here that the use of verbs and prepositions by ESL learners of English requires a lot of diligence. There are some verbs which require the use of a preposition after them to express a complete thought (e.g. They *laughed at* her jokes) and some which do not (e.g. They *mock* him because he keeps falling off his bike). Furthermore, there are some verbs that demand particular prepositions (e.g. the verb 'enable' requires the preposition 'to' as in "I am looking for a job which will *enable* me *to* develop my skills"), and others that go with more than one preposition (e.g. 'to commend' requires the prepositions 'on/for' as in "The Judge *commended* him *on/for* his bravery."; 'to acquiesce' requires the prepositions 'to/in' as in "Reluctantly, he *acquiesced to/in* the plans."; 'to enter' requires the prepositions 'for/in' when it means to be included in a competition, race or examination as in "John and Mary have been *entered for/in* the100 metres in Douala next year); and 'to abbreviate' takes the preposition 'to' or the adverb 'as' as in "Daniel" is often *abbreviated to* 'Dan' and "Chief Executive Officer is *abbreviated as* 'CEO'). In view of the afore-mentioned, the focus of this paper is to examine the use of verbs and prepositions by ESL learners in Cameroon in order to corroborate and ascertain the linguistic peculiarity of Cameroon English as far as this linguistic phenomenon is concerned.

2. Verbs and Prepositions

Richards & Schmidt (2002) defines a verb as a word which, (i) occurs as part of the predicate of a sentence; (ii) carries markers of grammatical categories such as tense, aspect, person, number and mood; and (iii) refers to an action or state (e.g. "He opened the door" and "Jane loves Tom"). This reveals that a verb is a part of speech which includes words like *go, see, understand* and *seem.*

The most proto-typical verbs denote actions performed by an agent, such as *run, sing, throw, hit* and *give.* But many other items are verbs even though they have less typical meanings; for instance, *die, sleep, believe, understand, elapse, ensue, become, seem, have* and *be.* The English modal auxiliaries such as *must* and *should*, are also usually classed as verbs.

Worthy of note is that what unites the class of verbs is their grammatical behaviour. For example, verbs in English and in many other languages are marked for tense (e.g. Susie drinks brandy versus Susie drank brandy). They also frequently exhibit agreement (e.g. "Susie smokes" versus "Susie and Janet smoke"). But the most central characteristic of a verb is the requirement that it must be accompanied by one or more noun phrases, its arguments, in a grammatical sentence. For example, the verbs *smile* and *smoke* take only one argument (e.g. "Susie smiled" and "Susie smokes". Furthermore, the verbs *buy* and *kiss* require two arguments (e.g. "Susie bought a car" and "Susie kissed Natalie". In the same light, the verbs *give* and *show* require three arguments (e.g. "Susie gave me this book" and "Susie showed Mike her new car". These differences in grammatical behaviour illustrate sub-categorization, and they involve differences in transitivity (Task and Stockwell, 2007:316-317).

A preposition (Latin *praeponere* 'to place in front of') is a part of speech which includes words such as *to, with* and *of* (Trask and Stockwell, 2007:228). Prepositions, in their original meaning, denote relations between elements regarding the basic relations of locality (e.g. on, over, under), temporality (e.g. before, after, during), causality (e.g. because of), and modality (e.g. like). To this end, a preposition has only one major property: it combines with a following noun phrase – its object –to form a larger syntactic unit – a prepositional phrase (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). With regard to this, a preposition can be broadly construed as a word used with nouns, pronouns and gerunds to link them grammatically to other words. The phrase so formed, consisting of a preposition and its complement, is a prepositional phrase (e.g. to the car, for a while, with Susie, after the war, in spite of the weather).

In English, a prepositional phrase may be "discontinuous" (e.g. Who(m) did you speak to?), may express such meanings as possession (e.g. The leg of the table), direction (e.g. to the bank), place (e.g. at the corner), time (e.g. before now). They can also mark case. For example, in the sentence: "Timothy killed the policeman with a revolver", the preposition "with" shows that "a revolver" is in the instrumental case (Richards and Schmidt, 2002).

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize here that, in English, there are groups of words (e.g. in front of, owing to) that can function like single-word prepositions. Furthermore, some prepositions, such as *under* and *after*, express identifiable meanings (e.g. Deborah was holding a file under her arm (i.e. between her upper arm and the side of her chest).

Others, such as *of*, have a purely grammatical function; for instance, in the noun phrase "the end of the year", the preposition "of" serves merely to connect the smaller noun phrase "the year" to the rest of the bigger one "the end of year", but "of the year" is still a prepositional phrase. With regard to this, Trask and Stockwell, 2007) hold that prepositions are analysed in cognitive linguistics as the realization of image schemas: basic representations of the physical and spatial movement involved in *through, over, under, into, from, beside* and *soon*. It is healthy to point out here that, in English, there are some verbs which agree with certain prepositions and there are others which do not agree with any preposition after them.

3. Methodology and Data

The data for this study was collected through a production test. The test consisted of a gap test task (GTT), a multiple choice comprehension task (MCCT), and a sentence correction task (SCT). The GTT contained sentences wherein the respondents were asked to fill in each of the gaps with a preposition so that the sentence is complete and expresses a complete thought. Tokens such as "They were mocking _____ him because he kept falling off his bike" and "She is so funny – she really makes me _____ laugh" were used to elicit responses from the respondents. In the MCCT, respondents were asked to choose from the alternatives in brackets the preposition that best completes the sentence. Tokens such as "People who were advocating _____change are now ashamed of themselves" (nil, for, about) and "Why do you speak _____ such a loud voice?" (with, in, on) were used.

In Both the GTT and MCCT, respondents were asked to write "Nil" where no preposition is required. In the SCT respondents were asked to judge the acceptability of the test sentences; if a sentence was judged unacceptable, the subjects had to correct it. Some of the tokens used were "Computerization should enable us cut production costs by half" and "Eto'o succeeded to score the promised goal".

In all, twenty pairs of verb + preposition (V+P) were tested: enable to, result in, contribute to, adjourn to, adjudicate on, admit to, arrogate to, associate with, speak in, accuse of, charge with, acquit of, prefer to, bamboozle into, decide at, correspond to, stand in, succeed in, laugh at, and succeed to. Twelve verb + nil preposition (V+Ø) were also tested: mock, boo, bully, make, advocate, stress, emphasize, abdicate, heed, demand, discuss, and enter.

Thus, the corpus consisted of thirty-two targeted sentences. The test was administered to 85 randomly selected English Major and Linguistics graduate and post-graduate students who are attending organized remedial classes in Yaounde in preparation for the competitive entrance examinations into Higher Teacher Training Colleges (ENS) Yaounde, Maroua, and Bambili. These students were from four State universities in Cameroon: Yaounde I (40), Buea (25), Dschang (14), and Douala (06). The data collected is jointly analysed and the results of the analysis is presented on tables. Also, peculiar feature specifications are highlighted and discussed.

4. Test Results and Analysis

The data collected through the production test is analysed using a scoring scheme wherein a response that reflected the Standard British English (SBE) parameter settings got a point and any other got no point. Features specifications are identified and analysed. The results of the respondents' performance are jointly presented in tables for description and interpretation. Table 1 below shows the general performance of the respondents.

Table: Respondents performance

Feature specifications	Number of instances	Percentage score
SBE parameter settings	935	30.56%
Substitution of SBE preposition	1105	36.11%
Redundant use of preposition	850	27.78%
Omission of preposition	170	05.55%
TOTAL	3060	100%

As can be inferred in the table above, respondents produced 935(30.56%) instances wherein they respected the SBE parameter settings in the use of verbs with prepositions. They also produced 2125 (69.44%) instances wherein they employed other parameter settings in using verbs and prepositions.

In this instance, they produced 1105(36.11%) instances whereby the expected SBE preposition after some verbs is substituted for another preposition; 850 (27.78%) instances wherein communicational redundant prepositions which are supposed to be omitted do occur in the learners' grammar; and 170 (05.55%) instances in which null-preposition construction occur after verbs, in the learners' language. The figure below feasibly illustrates the respondents use of the verbs under study with prepositions.
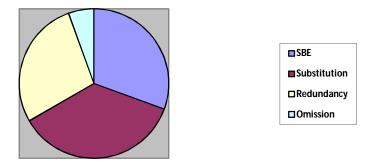

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents' performance in the use of verbs and prepositions

The pie chart visibly presents the percentage score in the use of verbs with prepositions by ESL learners in Cameroon. They scored 30.56% in respecting the Standard British English (SBE) parameter settings, 36.11% in substituting the standard preposition that agrees with the verb in the context in which it is used for another, 27.78% in deploying redundant prepositions after verbs that do not require one to convey a complete thought, and 5.55% in omitting the required preposition after a verb. A detailed analysis of the feature specifications in the learners' grammar is presented below.

The responses provided in the data show that the respondents substituted the SBE preposition 'in' that agrees with verbs such as 'result', 'succeed', 'speak' for other prepositions as illustrated by the following examples:

9) The Syrian president's refusal to step down *resulted to* the bloodiest civil war in their history. (for SBE 'resulted in'[2]; i.e. to cause a particular situation to happen)
10) The campaign has certainly *succeeded to raise* public awareness of the issue.(for SBE 'succeeded in raising' i.e. achieved something)
11) Why do you *speak with* such a loud voice? (for SBE 'speak in').

What is also noticed in the data is that the recurrent mismatch of verbs such as 'succeed' and the preposition 'to', as seen in example 10, makes the respondents use the base form of the verb that proceeds the preposition instead of the –ing participial form [e.g. Eto'o *succeeded to score* the promised goal (for SBE 'succeeded in scoring' i.e. achieved something)]. Another example in the same light is 'She was *bamboozled to* tell them her credit card number (for SBE "bamboozled into telling" i.e. to trick or deceive someone, often by confusing her).

Furthermore, the data reveal that respondents substitute the preposition 'to' for another preposition after verbs such as contribute, admit, arrogate, correspond, as seen below.

12) Smoking *contributed for* his early death. (SBE "contributed to"; i.e. to help to cause an event or situation)
13) Men will not be *admitted in* the restaurant without a tie. (for SBE "admitted to"; i.e. to allow someone to enter a place).
14) They *arrogate for* themselves the power to punish people. (for SBE "arrogate to"; i.e. to take something without having the right to do so)
15) Your profile does not *correspond with* the profile advertised. (for SBE 'correspond to')
16) When the Fon dies, his eldest son will *succeed on* the throne. (for SBE 'succeed to' i.e. to take a position after someone else).

Another feature specification visible in the data is the redundant use of prepositions, which are supposed to be omitted, after verbs that do not require one. In this situation respondents employ varied prepositions in null-preposition construction after verbs as the samples below illustrate.

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[2] when a situation or problem is caused by a particular event or activity, the expression 'result from' is used e.g. His difficulty in walking results from a childhood illness.

17) They were *mocking at* him because he kept falling off his bike. (for SBE "mocking"; i.e. to laugh at someone, often by copying him in funny and unkind way)

18) She is so funny – she really *makes* me *to* laugh. (for SBE "makes"; i.e. to cause something)

19) He has a strong personality, but don't let him *bully at* you. (for SBE "bully" you; i.e. to hurt or frighten someone who is smaller or less powerful than you, often forcing them to do something they do not want to do)

20) The audience has started *booing at* the musician loudly. (for SBE "booing" i.e. make an expression of strong disapproval or disagreement)

21) People who are *advocating for* change are now ashamed of themselves. (for SBE "advocating" i.e. publicly supporting an idea or way of doing things).

22) The Doctor *emphasized on* the importance of fresh vegetables in the diet. (for SBE "emphasize" i.e. to show or state that something is very important or worth giving attention)

23) Josephine was accused of *abdicating from* all responsibility for the project. (for SBE "abdicating" i.e. stop controlling or managing something that you are in charge of).

24) The airline has been criticized for failing to *heed to* advice about lack of safety routines. (for SBE "heed" i.e. to pay attention to something especially advice or a warning)

25) Workers are tired of *demanding for* pay increase. (for SBE "demanding")

26) The new Principal *stressed on* the importance of punctuality. (for SBE "stressed" i.e. emphasized or gave special attention)

27) The next chapter *discusses about* the effects on the environment. (for SBE "discusses"[3] i.e to talk or write about a subject in details).

27) The police *entered into*[4] the building through the side door.(for SBE "entered" i.e.to come or go into a particular place)

   The data further show that null-preposition construction occurs after verbs, in the learners' grammar, in situations where prepositions are required to express a complete thought as the sample below illustrate.

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[3] But when to discuss means to talk about a subject with someone and tell each other your ideas or opinions, it takes a preposition. E.g. The police want to discuss these racist attacts with the local people).

[4] the expression 'enter into' means to start or become involved in something, especially a discussion or agreement

28) Computerization should *enable* us cut production costs by half.(for SBE "enable" us "to"; i.e. to make something possible or make someone able to do something).

It is healthy to point out here that the data also provided other recurrent structures that do not tie with the parameter settings of the verb and preposition agreement as stipulated by the English language.

Some of these recurrent structures, which have not been fitted in the frame of feature specifications already identified above, involve substitution of the preposition for another preposition after some verbs. For instance, 'on' for 'in' with the verb 'adjudicate' [e.g. He was asked to *adjudicate in* the dispute (for SBE "adjudicate on"; i.e. to act as a judge or to make a formal decision about something)]; 'until' for 'to' after the verb 'adjourn' [e.g. The meeting was *adjourned to* Tuesday (for SBE "adjourned until"; i.e. to have a pause or rest during a formal meeting or trial)]; (iii) 'with' for 'to' after the verb 'associate' [e.g. Most people *associate* this brand of wine *to* good quality' (for SBE "associate … with"; i.e. to connect somebody/something in your mind with someone or something)]; 'of' for 'for' with the verb 'accuse' (e.g. The Surgeon was *accused for* negligence. (for SBE "accused of"); 'with' for 'for' with the verb 'charge' [e.g. She has been *charged for* murdering her husband. (for SBE "charged with" i.e. accuse formally); 'of' for 'from' after the verb 'acquit' [e.g. He was *acquitted from* all the charges against him. (for SBE "acquitted of" i.e to decide officially in a court of law that someone is not guilty of a particular crime)]; 'to' for 'than' with the verb 'prefer' [e.g. Most members *prefer* Amos as a leader *than* David (for SBE 'to')]; 'at' for 'in' with the verb 'decide' [e.g. We will *decide in* the meeting whether to call off the strike. (decide at); and 'in' for 'on' after the verb 'stand' as in [Jonathan is a nice man as long as you don't *stand on* his way (for SBE "stand in")].

The foregoing analyses reveal that verbs and prepositions agreement is a significant structural element in producing written text. They carry syntactic and semantic functions. Consequently, they are cardinal in processing language in communication. However, acquiring verb-preposition usage is challenging to ESL learners and speakers because they are very challenging, both at the level of speaking or writing, and need high cognitive and mental work from language users' part. In this regard L2 learners' grammar continuously exhibit verb-preposition agreement that is appealing only to non-native speakers of the language.

This can be justified by the data provided for this paper wherein there are recurrent incongruous agreements that are appealing and comprehensible to non-native speakers of the English language.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the use of some verbs and prepositions in the grammar of ESL learners in Cameroon in order to corroborate and ascertain the linguistic peculiarity of Cameroon English as far as this linguistic phenomenon is concerned. A production test, made up of gap test task (GTT), a multiple choice comprehension task (MCCT) and correction of individual sentence task (CIST), was administered to 85 university students. After a thorough perusal of the data provided, it became evident that communicational redundant prepositions which are supposed to be omitted do occur in the learners' grammar as learners employ varied prepositions in null-preposition construction after a verb. The results further show that null-preposition construction occurs after the verb, in the learners' language, in situations where a preposition is required to express a complete thought. Also, prepositions are used, after verbs, variedly without taking into consideration the syntactic and semantic features of the message to be conveyed. The paper argues that the changes inscribed in the way these verbs and prepositions are used are products of realities in new language speaking context such as Cameroon.

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