

Yorùbá and French determiners: Implication for French language teaching and learning in Nigeria

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Abstract

French language is a second foreign language in Nigeria and most learners of the language come across it at the level of secondary school and tertiary institution. This is not the case with many Nigerian languages, especially the major ones. They are taught and learnt from the primary school through the secondary school to the tertiary institution. Native speakers of these languages encounter great difficulties in learning French usually as a result of 'mother tongue interference'. The difficulties are intensified by the fact of the time of introduction of the language. To facilitate and improve teaching and learning of the language by native speakers of the Yorùbá language, this paper adopts the tenets of contrastive analysis to resolve difficulties that could arise as a result of the differences between the determiners (particularly, definite and indefinite articles) in the two languages.

Introduction

Language is at the centre of human life. It is one of the most important ways of expressing our love or our hatred for people. It is vital in achieving many of our goals and our careers. It is a source of artistic satisfaction. According to Cook (1991), we use language for planning our lives and remember our past. We exchange ideas and experiences through language. Some people are able to do some or all these in more than one language. Knowing another language may mean getting a job, a chance to get educated, an opportunity to interact with other people, the ability to take a fuller part in the life of one's own country or the opportunity to immigrate to other country, since a good knowledge of an international language will enhance someone's chances of getting a good job, favour social interaction, promote international travels. In the words of Sapir (1921:8) in Lyons (2009:3), language is a purely human and non instinctive method of communicating ideas and desire by means of voluntarily produced symbols. Whereas, Hall (1968:58) in Àjàní (2011:164), language is an institution whereby human beings communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral, auditory arbitrary symbol.

Linguistic interference is a controversial issue in second or third language acquisition and this is because in an attempt by students to produce or write in the target language, they commit certain grammatical or pronunciation errors due to the impact of a linguistic interference. Linguistic interference in most cases affects the communication process

Linguistic interference as we all know, is what is referred to as the use of features that belong to one language while speaking or writing another language and this happens when two languages overlap and we have a linguistic system of one of the languages transferred into another language in the channel of communication and a lot has been said about it by different scholars across the globe. According to Mackey (1968), Weinreich (1974), Ajani (2011) and Ògúnsoji (2013), linguistic interference could take any of the different forms below:

- **Phonetic form:** When speaker substitute the sound system present in one language for the one that is absent in the foreign form.
- **Syntax form:** That happens at the level of structural interference.
- **Lexical interference:** This involves the integration of foreign forms into the speech of the bilingual, either as units or structure.
- **Cultural interference:** According to Ògúnsoji (2013), interference of this nature can be noticed in many areas but highly prominent at the level of greeting when a Yorùbá – English bilingual transfers the system of Yorùbá greeting into that of English.

Example:

- | | |
|------------------|----------------------|
| - Ilé ñkó? | - How is the family? |
| - Šé àlàáfíà ni? | - Hope you are fine? |

Semantic interference

This happens when a familiar phenomena or experience that has been classified differently in another language interferes with one another. Ògúnsoji (2013) and Mackey (1968) have tried to explain this in their works on the concept of bilingualism. Ògúnsoji (2013) is of a view that semantic interference can be easily noticed in the area of colour because where a Yorùbá-English bilingual does not have an elaborate experience of colour in his mother tongue, his second language English has different numbers of colour. What then is a linguistic interference?

From Weinreich (1964:1) point of view, linguistic interference is an instance of deviation from the norms of either language, which occurs in the speech of bilingual as a result of their contact with more than one language.

Similarly, on linguistic interference, Weinreich (1964), opines that the term linguistic interference implies the rearrangement of a pattern that results from the introduction of elements into the more highly structured domains of language such as the bulk of the phonetic system, a large part of the morphology and syntax and such area of vocabulary.

The French language

The French language is a romantic language belonging to the Indo-European family. It is an official language in 29 countries and most of which formed *la francophonie* (The

community of French speaking countries). It is an official language of all United Nation Agencies and of a large number of European Union, NATO, WHO etc. It is one of the top three most useful languages for business apart from English and Chinese but ahead of Spanish and other European languages. French is spoken as a first language in France, the Romady region in Switzerland, Belgium, the province of Quebec in Canada and official language in all francophone countries in Africa. According to Adélekàn (1983) cited in Aràromí (1996),

“French language has been taught in Nigerian since 1859. It was among the earliest subjects introduced in the first secondary school founded in Lagos in 1859. In April 1878, the Wesleyan High School and Training Institution was opened and French was one of the modern languages taught in that school”.

However, up till the independence period, French was not officially introduced into the secondary school curriculum. After the Yaoundé conference of 1961 where it was decided that a second European language should be considered not only as a means of communication among the English and French speaking countries in Africa but also as an international language with a wider purpose of communication with countries all over the world, French becomes an official language to be taught in schools in Nigeria.

The Yorùbá language

The Yorùbá language is a language spoken in Southwest of Nigeria by more than (20) twenty million people. It is also a language widely spoken in Benin republic and in Togo as mother tongue. According to Bamgboṣe (1982:19), Yorùbá language was reduced into writing in the nineteenth century. Bamgboṣe (1982) is of the view that Yorùbá language is quite fortunate in several ways, firstly, it is a subject of early linguistic study notable by Yorùbá scholars and missionaries, secondly, its orthography, which had been the subject of dispute among the early scholars of the language was revised and finally agreed upon at the orthographic conference of 1875. Thirdly, by the early twentieth century, a reasonable literature came alive in Yorùbá language and a good example of this was the CMS Ìwé Kíkà (reading).

Article as a subdivision of determiners in French and in Yorùbá

A determiner is a word that helps to identify a noun in terms of position, quality or reference. According to Anko (2010), determiners are subdivided into three categories namely pre-determiner such as all, both, half, many etc, post determiner such as some, little, few etc and determiner proper where article (definite and indefinite) belong to. In French language, articles are grouped into three namely, the definite article (le, la, l') (the) used to identify a particular thing or person, the second article is indefinite article (un/une) (a or an) used to refer to something unspecific or something that one do not really know

about and the third one is called partitive article (*du*) (any or some) used to talk about quantity or amount. Example: *Donnez moi du sucre* (Give me some sugar).

Since the focus of this paper is on definite and indefinite articles, there is a need to take the articles one after the other.

The definite article in French

This article is categorized into the following:

- *Le* – When the noun is a masculine singular.
Example: *le garçon* - (the boy)
- *La* – When the noun is a feminine singular noun.
Example: *La victim* - (the victim)
- *L'* – When a masculine or feminine noun start with a vowel letter such as a, i, o, e, u or a silence 'h'.
Example: *L' avion* - (the plane)
L'homme - (the man).

In the English language, the above are represented with definite article, 'the'.

Like definite article, the indefinite article in French has three major forms, namely:

- *Un*: Used for singular masculine noun.
Example: (A man) - *Un homme*
(A village) - *Un village*
- *Une* : Used for singular feminine noun.
Example: (A woman) - *Une femme*
(A car) - *Une voiture*
- *Des* : Used for masculine plural and feminine plural.
Example:
(The girls) - *Des filles*

In English, both *un* and *une* are represented with, *a* or *an* “*one boy – un garçon*”, “*a girl – une fille*”, “*an elephant – un elephant*” while *des* means some.

- (Some boys)- *Des garcon*
- (Some girls) - *Des filles*

While the third, partitive article, is used to talk about quantity or amount.

Example: (Give me some sugar) - *Donnez moi du sucre*

Articles in Yorùbá

According to Johnson (2001), the Yorùbá language has no article, however, when definiteness is required, the numeral “*kan*” (contracted from *okan* “one”) is used for *a* or *an* while the demonstrative *náà* or *ni* (that, the and one) is used for the definite article “the”.

To Johnson (2001), the word ‘kan’ therefore cannot be correctly used as an article because it is made to do a duty for it. Let us look at the sentences below to illustrate the above view:

- Àjàní sits on a chair - (Àjàní s’assoit sur un banc) – Àjàní joko lori aga kan.

From the above, while French and English possess article ‘a’ and ‘un’ respectively, in Yorùbá, it does not exist.

Similarly, in ‘mo pàdé ọmọ náà’

- Mo pa ejò náà.
- Mo rí ọmọ kan
- Ade gbà ipo kan
- Kunle ni ìwé kan

Definiteness is required and consequently the particles representing *an* and *the* are used, the above examples are enough to show that articles do not exist in Yorùbá.

Implications

A language is learnt by contact and when languages come into contact, there is the development of what is referred to as linguistic interference either positively (when it aids the learning of the target language) or negatively (when it makes the target language difficult). Every second or third language learner has the problem of linguistic interference because the habit we acquired in our mother tongue may not be easily displaced off when we learn another language with the case of absent of determinant (definite and indefinite articles in Yorùbá language). In French language, it exists and it has even become a complex case at the level of gender (masculine and feminine) and at the level of number (singular and plural) all possessed by French language, Yorùbá learners of French language are faced with enormous divergence because of the absent of definite and indefinite articles in Yorùbá language and because of this, they find it difficult to make use of French articles where necessary. Consider the following sentences in Yorùbá:

- Ìwé náà wà lóri tàbìlì:- The book is on the table:- Le livre est sur la table.
- Mo ri ọmọdékùnrin kan:- I saw a boy:- J’ai vu un garçon.
- Àjàní pa ejò kan:- Ajani killed a snake:- Ajani a tue un serpent.
- Adé ra àwọ̀n ìlù yẹ̀n:- Ade bought those drums:- Ade a achete les tamtam.
- Mo rí obìrin náà:- I saw a woman:- J’ai vu une femme.
- Wọ̀n fún mi ní ọ̀ṣẹ̀ náà:- They gave me the soap:- Ils m’ont donne le savon.
- Adékọyà rí bàlúù kan:- Adekoya saw a plane:- Adekoya a vu un avion.

From the above, one could see that in Yorùbá language when definiteness is required, the numeral ‘Kan’ is used for ‘a’ or ‘an’ in English, ‘un’ or ‘une’ in French, e.g. Àjàní pa ejò kan, Adékọyà rí bàlúù kan and the demonstrative ‘náà’ becomes a definite article ‘the’ in English and ‘le’ or ‘la’ in French language, e.g. mo rí ọkùnrin náà, Àjàní ati Adékọyà ri obìrin náà.

The word *kan* or *náà* cannot be correctly called an article simply because it is only used to do the duty of an article ‘un/une’ in French where definite and indefinite article exists, consider also the following examples:

- Àjàní ra bàtà kan ‘Àjàní bought a shoe’; ‘Àjàní a achete un chausire’
- Adékoyà ra ìlù náà ‘Adékoyà bought the drum’; ‘Adékoyà a achete le tamtam’

In the above examples, ‘*kan* and *náà*’ used for definite and indefinite article do not change their forms for the object possessed to show the gender of the object possessed unlike in French where the article shows the object possessed.

The above few examples show that Yorùbá learners of French encounter some difficulty in learning French, especially, the aspect of the use of definite and indefinite articles. As determined, while French would use ‘un’ for masculine object: j’ai un livre ‘I have a book’ (Mo ní ìwé kan), ‘une’ is used for female object: J’ai une voiture ‘I have a car’ (Mo ní ọkọ kan), *kan* is used for both masculine and feminine object in Yorùbá. Furthermore, while *náà* is used for masculine or feminine object in Yorùbá, the same *náà* becomes *le* or *la* in French depending on the object in the language.

Recommendations

In making recommendation, it is important to start with the notion of ‘error correction’ and then the impacts of contrastive analysis in French class. According to Debyser (1993) in Soetan (2013:99), Error correction is not only of practical importance but also a vital issue in second or third language acquisition. Error correction is often subsumed under what Soetan (2013) referred to as negative evidence and this is because in an attempt to keep on communicating in the target language (which is French here), certain grammatical or preconception errors occur, which Nelson Brook (1960) quoted in Soetan (2013), explains have a relationship to learning another language.

Error correction in language acquisition is highly pertinent. According to Karra (1996), errors sometimes obstruct communication. However, they quite often facilitate second language acquisition as well as helping the learners acquire correction technique. According to Corder (1988), occurrence of error is a manifestation of learners adjusting to learning and a signal to a teacher about his or her teaching. Lyster and Ranta (1997) in Àjàní (2011) summarize as follows using questions concerning error correction towards providing strategic basis for improving language learning:

- Should learners’ errors be corrected?
- When should learners’ errors be corrected?
- Which errors should be corrected?
- How should errors be corrected?
- Who should do the correction?

All the above questions are highly pertinent in French class especially in a bilingual environment. Hence for effective teaching of French language to Yorùbá learners of French

language, a French teacher needs to equip him/herself with all the above questions and have adequate answers to them so as to tackle students' linguistic problems in the class. Furthermore, French teacher needs knowledge of contrastive analysis which involves a rigorous and systematic study of two languages, this always allows him to have in-depth knowledge of the languages, determining differences that could occasion interference and negative transfer. The point here is captured by Corder (1978) in Ukaeje (1995),

The major contribution of the linguist to language teaching was seen as an intense contrastive study of the system of the second and the mother tongue of the learner, out of this could come as inventory of areas of difficulty which the learner could encounter and the value of inventory would be to divert the learner's attention to these areas so that he might devote special care and emphasis in his teaching to the overcoming or even avoiding of these predicted difficulties.

And by Lado (1957) in Ajani (2015),

The learner's knowledge of the source language affects the learning of the target language; where structure of the language coincides formally and semantically, the learning process will be easier, where they differ, the learning process will be difficult.

From the above, one could see that the use of a contrastive analysis which is a general approach to the investigation of language and which allow us to identify the point of structural differences which are eventually studied as areas of potential difficulty is inevitable in our classes.

By and large, taking into consideration all what have been said on error correction and contrastive analysis and making use of the both in our class will definitely serve as a good means of solving student difficulties in learning French since both will let the teacher and students see clearly the ear of similarity and dissimilarity in the structure of the two languages French and Yorùbá language and this would enable French language to be taught and learnt better.

Conclusion

From our discussion so far, three main issues emerged. First is an expedient need for studies on contrastive analysis in French class and this further cares for a deeper understanding of Yorùbá grammar by other teachers and Yorùbá learners of French language. The implication of this is that learning and understanding a mother tongue in Yorùbá language is very important because a child learns better and develops cognitively if he is taught in his mother tongue continuously over a period of time. This will enable him or her gain a sound footing in learning a foreign language like French.

The second point is that our teaching method should be re-examined, the idea of teaching French without taking into consideration a mother tongue should be discouraged for effective teaching of French grammar. Learning should start from known to unknown

and by this, they will be well equipped, and finally, enough French/Yorùbá grammar text books should be made available to both the learners and teachers and this will go a long way in enhancing learning of French language in Yorùbá speaking area of Nigeria.

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