

SYNFORMIC CONFUSION AT THE ADVANCED LEVEL IN EFL TEACHING IN ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

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I. Introduction

“Language proficiency” is a most elusive concept. Several definitions have been proposed as have numerous and varied frameworks for testing it, yet what constitutes proficiency in a language is still under discussion. Nonetheless, two factors remain constant: language proficiency is related to language *use* rather than linguistic *knowledge* and language use, in turn, has an intricate relationship to context of use. These two factors are relevant in that they justify the specificity of the research topic that involves us. The choice between a word and another which is similar should not be a matter of mere luck and is not immaterial to teachers who train advanced students of English seeking to become future professionals of the language. It is with this in mind that we decided to focus on synformy.

Synforms are words with a similar but not the same form. They may include words which share related meanings (such as *bored/boring*), words with the same root but different meanings (e.g. *comprehensive/comprehensible*) or words which seem related by form or meaning but which are not (*several/severe*). As Kocić (2008) states, “if established that synformic confusions represent a major difficulty for the learners, then appropriate materials and teaching treatment could be applied” (p. 52). Advanced students undoubtedly grapple with synforms, confusing both basic forms (*economic/economical*) and more complex ones (*arise/arouse/rise/raise*), and a good step in dealing with a problem is always identifying where it comes from.

II. Methodology

In our research, we sought to identify some possible causes of synformic confusion. In order to do that, we resorted to Error Analysis (EA), a branch of applied linguistics that seeks to classify errors and identify its sources –which under EA are considered to be broader than the interference of the mother tongue (contrary to Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis)- in order to aid the teaching-learning process (Khansir, 2012, pp. 1027-1029).

As cited in Ellis (1994), Corder identifies five steps involved in error analysis. We have only walked the first four: (1) Collection of a sample of learner language, (2) Identification of errors, (3) Description of errors, and (4) Explanation of errors.

To collect the data (step 1), we worked with a specific sample, “one sample

of language use collected from a limited number of learners” (Ellis, 1994, p. 49). Since the focus was on synformic confusion, rather than collecting the data from spontaneous output, we did so through *experimental elicitation* (Ellis, p. 50), that is, through a specifically designed instrument which in this case serves to test, among other skills, vocabulary knowledge. The exercise combines the features of both different types of rational cloze tests (*cf.* Sadeghi, 2014, p. 77) and word building exercises. Basically, the students are given a text with gaps to fill (gaps strategically made by the teachers) and a list of different content words; the word used to fill in each blank must have the same root as one of the content words provided as options, and must fit the gap both in terms of language and syntax.

Having said all this, we come to one of the most significant questions in EA: what constitutes an *error*?² In our case, the answer was not complicated. An academic standard was the measuring rod, so we worked with two criteria: grammaticality (Is the word well-formed and does it fit the syntactic structure?) and semantic relevance to the context (Does the word fit the gap in terms of local and overall meaning?). That which deviated from the standard was identified as an error (step 2). Then came the time to describe errors (step 3).³

To do so, we considered in which ways the target form (the correct, expected word) was altered, and classified the mistakes accordingly (*cf.* surface strategy taxonomy in Ellis, p. 55). At this point, an adaptation of a few of the ten synform categories designed by Laufer (as developed in Schmitt & McCarthy, 2008 and Kocić, 2008) became useful. The mistakes were categorized into six groups: wrong part of speech, incorrect suffix/element (a combination of Laufer’s categories 1, 2 and 3), incorrect prefix (categories 4 and 5), incorrect spelling (an extra letter, an *ss* instead of an *s*, etc.), inexistent synform (words with a similar form, but which do not exist), and, finally, wrong word (the use of one of the options provided in the cloze procedure in the incorrect blank).⁴ We should clarify that we decided to restrict the possibilities for what was considered a correct word to those forms that appeared in three mainstream dictionaries: Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online, Cambridge Dictionaries Online, Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary. After describing the mistakes (see grids herein below), we proceeded to the last step.

2 A note on terminology: In this paper, we use *error* and *mistake* interchangeably.

3 A word of caution is due here: we used Corder’s steps as sometimes overlapping phases that enrich and enable one another. When identifying the mistakes, for example, a description of such mistakes was necessary, and was undertaken either formally or informally.

4 The analysis of these mistakes is not within the scope of this paper.

The explanation stage in EA (step 4) seeks to identify where the error comes from. Without losing sight of the fact that, as authors have pointed out, “Errors can have more than one source” (Ellis, 1994, p. 62), we attempted to ascribe errors to different categories, which intermingle with one another, but can be individualized as follows for the sake of classification:

Poor reading comprehension skills (P. R. C.): the word chosen does not fit the co-text in terms of meaning.

Weak grammar knowledge (W. G.): the words’ meaning components are related to the correct word, but the word does not fit the syntactic structure.

Error arising from the interlanguage rules (IL): an inexistent word has been formed by wrongly applying existent and otherwise “valid” rules of the English grammar (usually through overgeneralization), or the inexistent English word is a false friend of a Spanish word. Interlanguage is a “system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target languages” (Brown, 1994, p 203). A system in itself, it is guided by its own transitory rules, made up of much of the grammar of that language, but also made up of the grammar of the mother tongue.

Now, let us consider the samples of errors.

CLOZE PROCEDURE A	Wrong part of speech	Incorrect Suffix / element	Incorrect Prefix	Incorrect Spelling	Inexistent Synform IL
1.Undermine					
2.Interdependencies					
3.Shifting	Shift Shifts W. G. P. R. C.	Shifted W. G.			
4.Increasingly	Increasing W. G.				
5.Centered			Self-centered P. R. C.		
6.Disruptive		Disrupting IL			
7.Underscore		Score Scores P. R. C. IL	Overscore Outscore IL/PRC		
8.Autonomy					Autonomacy
9.Network					

10.Monologic	Monologue W. G.	Mono- logue-like IL			Monologuing, Monologued, monologial, Monologist
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CLOZE PROCE- DURE A	Wrong part of speech	Incorrect Suffix / ele- ment	Incorrect Prefix	Incor- rect Spelling	Inexistent Synform IL
1.Capable	capacity P. R. C. W. G.		incapable P. R. C.		
2.Investme	Invest P. R. C. W. G.	Inversion IL			
3.Autonomy	Autonomous P. R. C. W. G.				
4.Measura- ble	Measuring W. G.	Measured W. G. Immeasurable P. R. C.		Meas- ured Meas- ured	Countermeas- ure
5.Noticeable		Noticed Unnoticed P. R. C.		Notisable Noticia- ble Noticable	Unnoticeable Noticiably
6. Intercon- nected	Interconnec- tion P. R. C. W. G.		Discon- nected Connected (55) P. R. C.	Dis- connected Connect- ed Inter- connected	
7. Implications		Implicatures IL Implication W. G.			
8. Monetary	Money P. R. C.				

9.Consensus	Consent P. R. C.			Concen- sus	Consentment consentiment Consention Consentuos consentious consentness consese consence Consensuous Consensus
10.Legiti- macy					Legitimation legitimization Legitimity

III. Explanation and analysis

Let us use a few examples to explain the different sources of errors. We recommend reading the full texts of the cloze procedures first (see Appendix Cloze Procedure A).

Cloze procedure A

EXAMPLE 1: *The bounded and (5) centered self is undone. Wrong form: self-centered.* “Self-centered” means “selfish” and does not therefore fit the sense required. Reading comprehension failed.

EXAMPLE 2: *While I have argued that, in contrast to the effects of the mobile phone, this process is (6) disruptive to close communities, there is at least... Wrong form: disrupting.* Many present participles (formed by a verb root and the inflectional suffix –ing) are used as adjectives. “Disrupting” is not one of them. The adjective derived from “disrupt” is formed with the –ive suffix which means “ability to,” “having the quality of,” “inclined to.” Here the use of –ing to form adjectives has been overgeneralized, thus leading to a mistake arising from the interlanguage rules.

EXAMPLES 3 and 4: *These ranges of technology (7) underscore the importance of connection as opposed to (8) autonomy, looking outward rather than inward... Wrong forms: score, scores, overscore, outscore. Autonomy.* The possible meanings of “score” are far from the sense of “underscore.” Comprehension failed. In the case of “scores,” the error also arose from a weak grammar, which leads to a lack of subject-verb concord. As for “overscore” and “outscore,” both not frequent yet existing common words, we believe that rather than being related to a lack of comprehension, they arise from an incorrect use of prepositions often used in compounding (interlanguage rules). “Autonomy” probably emerges from an overgeneralized use of the derivational suffix –cy,

which combines with adjectives to form nouns to refer to the state, quality or experience described by the adjective.

EXAMPLE 5: *Certainly technologies that enhance dialogue (e.g. telephone...) are more potent in their absorption of the individual into relationship than the (10) monologic/al technologies of radio or television. Wrong forms: monologuing, monologue, monologuial, monologist, monologue-like.* While “monologue” is a noun, the gap called for an adjective that premodified the noun “technologies.” A wrong identification of the part of speech required led to the mistake. In other cases, inexistent synforms were formed using common adjective suffixes (-ing, -ed, -al) or the noun suffix -ist). As for “monologue-like,” the rules of the interlanguage interfered: a common pattern for compounding (the combination of -like with nouns to indicate “resemblance”) was used incorrectly, though in this case the error might be related to meaning.

Cloze Procedure B

EXAMPLE 6: *Art constantly operates outside of itself interacting with outside sources of (2) investment. Wrong form: inversion.* The use of “inversion” instead of “investment” comes from the interference of the native language of the students. “Inversion” is a false friend of the Spanish noun “inversión,” as students pointed out.

EXAMPLE 7: *The art market is comprised of commodities embodied by culturally specialized qualities that (...) resist being (4) measurable. Wrong form: measuring, measured.* A lack of reading comprehension is probably the main cause of the mistake. A weak knowledge of the semantics of certain affixes is probably accountable for the error as well. The suffix -able combines with the verb “measure” to form an adjective that means “can be affected by the process described by the verb” (it has a passive and “potential” meaning). The suffix -ing, on the contrary, means “can affect or affects” (it has an active meaning). The suffix -ed indicates “has already been measured” (passive meaning, perfective aspect).

EXAMPLE 8: *The acknowledgement that the economy and art are (6) interconnected is an assertion that has enormous (7) implications... Wrong forms: implicature/s, implication.* In the case of “implicatures,” we believe the students succeeded in identifying the part of speech (noun) and aspects of it such as its number (plural), which amounts to good grammar; the root of the word is also correct, which both makes us think that the student aimed at the right word and in turn implies good reading comprehension; however, the suffix -ture forms a noun with a different meaning. Therefore, a wrong suffix was used to derive the target word. “Implication” on the other hand, is an error arising from

a weak grammar knowledge that leads the student to use the singular form of a countable noun even when the indefinite article is not present.

IV. Conclusions and further lines of research

The examples show that synformic confusion can be at least partly explained by the interference of Spanish and the wrong application of English grammar rules (Interlanguage), weak reading comprehension skills and a lack of solid grammar. The analysis also reveals that there is a strong relationship between the three sources of error. Good reading comprehension is bounded with a good understanding of the syntactic structure (“shift/s” –instead of “shifting” is possible neither as a noun nor as a verb both due to the sense and the syntactic context) and each possibly serves as scaffolding for one another. The wrong use of an affix (linked to interlanguage rules) might be related to a poor knowledge of the meaning conveyed by that affix, which relates to both morphology and semantics, components of grammar knowledge (consider “measurable” vs. “measured” vs. “measuring”). These constitute further lines of research which can enhance our knowledge of vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension and the ways in which grammar should be taught and learnt.

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Appendix

Cloze Procedure A

GAP-FILLING EXERCISE: Fill in the numbered blanks with suitable vocabulary items formed using words from the box below. You may use each item only once. Enter your answers on the ANSWER SHEET (10 POINTS).

depend – mine – disruption – center
 shift - monologue - autonomous – score – net – increase

As I have argued elsewhere (Gergen, 1999), most of the communication technologies of the 20th century functioned to (1) **UNDERMINE** the sense of the bounded self. Film, books, magazines, radio, television, and the internet all foster communication links outside one's immediate social surrounds. They enable one to participate in alternative systems of belief and value, in dialogues with novel and creative outcomes, and in projects that generate new (2) **INTERDEPENDENCIES**. The result is that the centered sense of a bounded self slowly gives way to a "multiphrenia" of partial and conflicted senses of self. Identity becomes fluid, (3) **SHIFTING** in a chameleon-like way from one social context to another. There is little in the way of "looking inward" to locate "one's true self," because there is little remaining of a core. Increasingly we are strung out across the continents, electronically and geographically mobile, and (4) **INCREASINGLY** over-committed to numerous relations, projects and desires. The bounded and (5) **CENTERED** self is undone. While I have argued that, in contrast to the effects of the mobile phone, this process is (6) **DISRUPTIVE** to close communities, there is at least one important way in which the mobile phone and the technologies of dispersion are similar. Both shift the understanding of self from the bounded to the relational. These ranges of technology (7) **UNDERSCORE** the importance of connection as opposed to (8) **AUTONOMY**, looking outward rather than inward, toward (9) **NETWORK** as opposed to self-sufficiency. In this sense, the mobile phone may be more significant than any other technology to date. Certainly technologies that enhance dialogue (e.g. telephone, internet, mobile phone) are more potent in their absorption of the individual into relationship than the (10) **MONOLOGIC/AL** technologies of radio or television.

Cloze Procedure B

GAP-FILLING EXERCISE: Fill in the numbered blanks with suitable vocabulary items formed using words from the box below. You may use each item only once. Enter your answers on the ANSWER SHEET. (10 POINTS)

autonomous – invest – measure – connection – capability

implicate – money – consent – legitimate – notice

Art as a commodity embodies intangible concepts and ideas by transforming them into material goods, (1) **CAPABLE** of being marketable, sellable, and collected. Art constantly operates outside of itself interacting with outside sources of (2) **INVESTMENT**. By interacting with the global economy, art subjects itself to external value measurements via monetary value, celebrity capital, redefinition through criticism, the specifics of purchase, sale, government grants and any other manner by which it perpetuates itself.

Artistic (3) **AUTONOMY** does not occur as a result of detachment from the market but from its unique position as a sub-market within the global economy. The art market is comprised of commodities embodied by culturally specialized qualities that are often problematic in that they resist being (4) **MEASURABLE**. However, as soon as artworks assume financial value within the art market, it cannot claim to be completely separate from the broader economy in terms of systems of production, promotion and criticism. Furthermore the ‘invisible hand’ of the market along with Alan Greenspan’s deregulatory policies from the first half of the decade, had (5) **NOTICEABLE** effects on the relationship between art and the market. The acknowledgement that the economy and art are (6) **INTERCONNECTED** is an assertion that has enormous (7) **IMPLICATIONS** for art as an entity of self-governance.

The economic system assigns (8) **MONETARY** value to instruments that through general (9) **CONSENSUS** are considered to be of ‘worth.’ The art market, similarly, is a system that revolves around inanimate objects given a degree of (10) **LEGITIMACY**, often by the price an art object assumes by its transactions within the economic sphere.