UNIT 13 : COMMON ERRORS IN THE USE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

UNIT STRUCTURE

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13.1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to

- identify the errors in concord, verb forms, order, preposition and conjunction in your speech and writing
- correct these errors in your speech and writing and thereby
- develop an awareness of grammaticality and appropriateness.

13.2. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this unit is to present a sample of some of the errors that users of English often make in their speech and writing. The errors are referred to as *common errors* and are quite different from what is known as *slips*. Slips, which could be ‘slips of the pen’ or ‘slips of the tongue’, can occur when

- one is tired or nervous
- one is in some situation of stress
- when the attention is divided
- when one is absorbed in some other activity.

We often refer to “silly mistakes” made by language users, mistakes they would not have otherwise made had they been a little more conscious or alert in the use of the second language.

On the other hand, errors are the result of a variety of pedagogical factors. Errors may occur in second language users of English due to language transfer which means that some of the features of our first language/mother tongue may find their place in our second language, which in this case is English. Such language transfer has been referred to as first language interference. Research has shown that sentences produced by second language users of English may exhibit interference from the mother tongue. In fact, it was found that as many as one- third of the deviant sentences of second language users could be attributed to language transfer.

Secondly, errors may occur in second language users of English due to incomplete or partial knowledge of the language system that is learnt over a period of time. With incomplete or partial knowledge of the language system, the language user makes an attempt to generalize out of the corpus of language that the user has so far acquired as a result of which the user tends to make errors. One of the aims of remedial teaching is to identify such errors made by the learner and to provide him/her with more input that would help to remedy these errors.

Errors made by second language users of English can be classified in terms of grammaticality though this does not mean that this is the only way of classifying errors. We can also refer to errors in terms of their appropriateness to a particular sociolinguistic context. Your sentence may be grammatically correct but may not be appropriate to a particular situation.

Here is an example:

Speaker A: Have you had your lunch?

Speaker B: Yes sir, lunch was had by me.

The response of speaker B is grammatically correct, but it is not appropriate to the informal situation in which the conversation is taking place. However, our primary concern in this unit is with the notion of grammaticality. Here we have identified errors made by language users in terms of concord, verb forms, word order, uses of prepositions and conjunction among others.

13.3. ERRORS OF CONCORD

The term 'concord' in grammar refers to the syntactic agreement that takes place between the subject and the verb at the levels of number and person of the subject in a sentence. It implies that a singular subject takes a singular verb and a plural subject takes a plural verb as the following examples show.

(a) I am reading a book
(b) We are playing cricket.
(c) You are not listening to me.
(d) She is making tea.
(e) They are not students.

In the above sentences we note that *I* agrees with am; *We/You/They* agree with *are* and *She* agrees with *is*. They look fairly straightforward and yet very often they tend to be problematic and be the cause of errors. Let us see how such errors in concord take place. The sentences beginning with asterisk (*) are considered wrong or unacceptable.

1. When two or more singular subjects are joined by *and* to refer to two separate person or things, a plural verb is used. But when they refer to the same person, a singular verb is used.
   (a) *It has been reported that the Principal and Secretary were to sign the order.

It has been reported that the Principal and Secretary was to sign the order.

(b) *It has been reported that the Principal and the Secretary was to sign the order.

It has been reported that the Principal and the Secretary were to sign the order.

(c) *The inspecting officials were impressed that bread and butter were served to the refugees in the relief camp.

The inspecting officials were impressed that bread and butter was served to the refugees in the relief camp.

2. When two or more singular nouns are joined by *with, together with, as well as, either, neither,* a singular verb is used.

(a) *The local MLA together with his wife are visiting the fair ground.

The local MLA together with his wife is visiting the fair ground.

(b) *Each of these projects are funded by the World Bank.

Each of these projects is funded by the World Bank.

3. When the subject is a collective noun, a singular verb is used.

(a) *The team comprising of IAS and IPS officers are to study various issues in the Indo-Bangla Border.

The team comprising of IAS and IPS officers is to study various issues in the Indo-Bangla border.

(b) *The All Assam Students' Union, in a press statement, have appealed to the officers to strike down the names of foreigners without any fear.

The All Assam Students' Union, in a press statement, has appealed to the officers to strike down the names of foreigners without fear.

4. When the subject is *There*, the verb agrees with the number of the noun that follows.

   (a) *There are a huge rush for tickets for the IPL match.

   There is a huge rush for tickets for the IPL match.

   (b) *There is five lady teachers in the staff.

   There are five lady teachers in the staff.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q. 1. Correct the following sentences:

(a) Oil and water does not agree.

(b) The informations are false.

(c) Bread and butter are good breakfast.

(d) Both the driver and the conductor was arrested.

(e) There was a large number of party workers in the Minister's election rally.

(f) All the major rivers of North India originates from the Himalayas.

(g) The Brahmaputra as well as its tributaries flow through Tibet before flowing into India.

(h) The officer have appointed a new typist.

13.4. ERRORS OF VERB FORMS

The term 'verb form' refers to the verb that carries the marker in terms of forms of grammatical categories such as tense, aspect, person etc and refers to an action or state. The forms of the verb include

(a) The base form which implies that the verb does not have any prefix or suffix attached to it. It performs an imperative function (Come with me.); present tense function (You play very well.) and infinitive function (I like to play.).

(b) The –s form which implies that the form consists of the base form and the –s suffix attached to it. It is used in third person singular number (He plays cricket.).

(c) The past form which implies that an –ed suffix is attached to regular verbs (She played very well.) while irregular verbs form the past tense by a change of vowels (She wrote a letter) or undergoing no change as in a few cases (She put the book on the table). They express past tense.

(d) The –ing form which implies that an –ing suffix is attached to the base form of the verb to perform a gerundial function (Reading is my hobby.) and active participle function (He is reading a book.).

(e) The past participle form which is similar to the past form in regular and irregular verbs and generally ends with –en.(The book was given./The thief was caught.)

Errors in the use of verb forms can be of various types some of which have been discussed below.

1. Certain verbs notably verbs of perception, feeling, states of mind, or relationships e.g. *see, hear, taste, feel, smell,* are not used in the present continuous tense. When one of these verbs is used to express an activity or a state that is still continuing, the simple present tense is used. This is a major area of errors of users of English in the use of verb forms.

   (a) *I am not seeing anything outside.
   I don't see anything outside.

   (b) *Are you hearing that noise?
   Do you hear that noise.

(c) *I am feeling a sharp pain at this spot.
I feel a sharp pain at this spot.

(d) *She is loving swimming very much.
She loves swimming very much.

(e) *I am recognizing you now.
I recognize you now.

2. A lot of common errors occur with the wrong use of the verb e.g. mixing up verbs like *stay – live, say – tell, hear – listen, do — commit* etc. a few examples are given.

(a) *I spoke to him to go.
I told him to go./I asked him to go.

(b) *She says French fluently.
She speaks French fluently.

(c) *Hear the advice of your teacher.
Listen to the advice of your teacher.

(d) *The doctor saw the pulse of the patient.
The doctor felt the pulse of the patient.

(e) *He denied to follow me.
He refused to follow me.

(f) *Please see my certificates.
Please look at my certificates.

3. A lot of errors occur due to the wrong use of the tenses which include confusing present perfect with the past, past perfect with the past and

so on. A few examples are given.

(a) *We have met them a year ago.

We met them a year ago.

(b) *I had gone to Kolkata this vacation.

I went to Kolkata this vacation.

(c) *I have worked here since one year.

I have worked here for one year.

(d) *He will come when he will be ready.

He will come when he is ready.

(e) *It's time that you go home.

It's time that you went home.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q. 2. Rewrite the sentences correctly

(a) I am understanding what you say.

(b) Hear your teacher in the class attentively.

(c) He has left ten minutes ago.

(d) He tells me a fool.

(e) He has not eaten his dinner.

(f) We are living here since 2000.

(g) He informed the matter to the police.

(h) She could not help to go there.

13.5. ERRORS OF ORDER

Order refers to the arrangement of words in a sentence, generally called word order. There is a definite word order for the assertive sentence. But when you look at the word order of a wh-question, you find a subject-verb inversion taking place. That is the order of an interrogative sentence. Similarly indirect questions and embedded questions have a definite word order. Here we shall look at some of the errors that users of English make at the level of word order.

1. Adjective phrases that are in an attributive position (i.e. before a noun in a noun phrase) may contain more than one adjective. When more than one adjective is placed before a noun in a noun phrase, the adjectives follow a definite word-order e.g. quality + length + colour + nationality.

   (a) * She is an old dignified lady.

   = She is a dignified old lady.

   (b) * Her face lit up with a cheerful bright smile.

   = Her face lit up with a bright cheerful smile.

2. When there are two or more adverbs after a verb (and its object), the normal order is adverb of manner + adv of place + adverb of time.

   (a) * She sang last night at the concert beautifully.

   = She sang beautifully at the concert last night.

   (b) * He spoke in the meeting well.

   = He spoke well in the meeting.

3. Subject – verb inversion takes place both in indirect and direct questions.

   (a) * Tell me what is her name.

   = Tell me what her name is.

(b) * Why you all are making a noise in the class ?

= Why are you all making a noise in the class ?

4. It is fairly usual not to put “I” first when there are two or more subjects.

(a) * I and Bonti were classmates.

= Bonti and I were classmates.

(b) * Bonti, I and Anil were classmates.

= Bonti, Anil and I were classmates.

5. Pre-determiners as the name implies, always precede determiners.

(a) * These both books are mine.

= Both these books are mine.

(b) * My all books are wet in the rain.

= All my books are wet in the rain.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q. 3. Correct the following sentences.

(a) She sent me a brown big packet.

(b) He came to Shillong on last Monday.

(c) I have living in Hyderabad for over two years.

(d) Why you are all making a noise in the class?

(e) Tell me what are you doing these days.

(f) He is not only known for his wealth but also for his wisdom.

(g) I neither insulted him nor his brother.

(h) Supposing if it rains, I shall not go out.

13.6 ERRORS OF PREPOSITIONS

Prepositions are words used with nouns or noun equivalents to show the relation in which these nouns stand to some other word in a sentence thus in the sentence “The book is on the table”, the preposition *on* expresses the relation between *the book* and *the table*.

The preposition and the noun together make a prepositional phrase in a sentence as in “He is in the room” where in the room is a prepositional phrase.

Prepositions may be single words eg *on, at, in, by, after, before,* etc. or they may be more than one word as in *instead of, in front of, for the sake of, at the back of,* etc.

1. A major cause of errors in the use of prepositions is the wrong omission of these words in a sentence.

(a) * Open page 75.
Open at page 75.

(b) *He has not replied your letter.
He has not replied to your letter.

(c) *Beware car thieves.
Beware of car thieves.

2. While in the above examples, the prepositions are wrongly omitted, in the following examples, the prepositions are wrongly used.

(a) *You should repent for your misdeeds.
You should repent your misdeeds.

(b) *It has been raining from morning.
It has been raining since morning.

(c) * He was forced to resign from his post.
He was forced to resign his post.

(d) * I prefer reading than writing.

I prefer reading to writing.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q. 4. Correct the following sentences

(a) I could not attend office due to illness.

(b) Write your answers with black ink.

(c) The visitor knocked the door but there was no answer.

(d) The judge ordered him to answer to his question.

(e) The train is bound to Howrah.

(f) This pencil is inferior than that.

(g) Reema was married with a doctor.

(h) You must feel ashamed for your folly.

(i) The money was divided among his two sons.

13.7. ERRORS OF CONJUNCTIONS

We use words and phrases to join or to connect elements in a sentence or a paragraph. These connecting devises are conjunctions. e.g.

(a) India and China are neighbouring countries.

(b) You may give me either a cup of tea or a glass of water.

(c) She tried hard but was unsuccessful.

The following are examples of conjunctions.

1. and, as well as, also, to,
2. but, yet, still, however, while,

3. or, else, otherwise
4. so, therefore, for, hence
5. either...or, neither...nor,
   both....and, though...yet,
   whether...or, not only...but also,
   hardly...when, no sooner...than,
   such...as, scarcely...when etc.

Here we shall look at a few types of errors in the use of conjunctions.

(a) * When it stopped raining, then I went out for a walk.
When it stopped raining, I went out for a walk.

(b) * Though he was tired, but he continued to work.
Though he was tired, he continued to work.

(c) * As the weather was fine, so the children had great fun.
As the weather was fine, the children had great fun.

(d) * If you work hard, then you will surely do well in the exams.
If you work hard, you will surely do well in the exams.

(e) * Not only he is wise, but strong also.
He is not only wise, but also strong.

(f) * Hardly had I reached home, than it began to rain.
Hardly had I reached home when it began to rain.

(g) * Either you are mad or pretend to be so.
You are either mad or pretend to be so.

(h) * He looks as if he was tired.
He looks as if he were tired.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q. 5. Rewrite the sentences correctly.

(a) Although he is old, but he does a lot of work.

(b) Unless you do not work hard, you will fail.

(c) He knows neither English or Hindi

(d) He had hardly reached school when the bell rang.

(e) Such employees that are honest are respected everywhere.

(f) Scarcely had we reached the station than the train arrived.

(g) As soon as the bell rang then the train began to move.



13.8. LET US SUM UP

In the introduction to this unit, we made a distinction between slips and errors. We looked at the ways by which a language user may make slips in the use of English. On the other hand, we noted that errors made by second language users can occur due to several factors. We discussed two of these factors: language transfer and generalization.

Next, we took up some common errors that are basically grammatical errors at the levels of concord, verb forms, word order, preposition and conjunction to enable you to identify the errors and to provide a correct version of the errors. The whole purpose of this unit has been to make you more aware of the notions of grammaticality and appropriateness in your use of English both in speech and writing.



13.9 FURTHER READINGS

1. Dowerah, Sawpon, A Students' Grammar of English, Guwahati : Students' Stores,
2. Sarkar, P. K. De, Higher English Grammar and Composition, Kolkata : Book Syndicate.

3. Taid, T. and U. Dutta, English for School (A Practical Approach to English Grammer and Composition), Guwahati : Students Stores.
4 Wren and Martin, High School English Grammar and Composition, New Delhi : S. Chand & Company.



13.10. ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. to Q. No 1 : (a) Oil and water do not agree.
(b) The information is false.
(c) Bread and butter is good breakfast.
(d) Both the driver and the conductor were arrested.
(e) There were a large number of party workers in the rally.
(f) All the major rivers of North India originate from the Himalayas.
(g) The Brahmaputra as well as its tributaries flows through Tibet before flowing into India.
(h) The officer has appointed a new typist.

Ans. to Q. No 2 : (a) I understand what you say.
(b) Listen to your teacher in the class attentively.
(c) He left ten minutes ago.
(d) He calls me a fool.
(e) He has not had his dinner.
(f) We have been living here since 2000.
(g) He informed the police of the matter.
(h) She could not help going there.

Ans. to Q. No 3 : (a) She sent them a big brown packet.
(b) He came to Shillong last Monday.
(c) I have been living in Hyderabad for over two years.
(d) Why are you making a noise in the class?
(e) Tell me what you are doing these days.
(f) He is known not only for his wealth but also for his wisdom.

(g) I insulted neither him nor his brother.

(h) If it rains, I shall not go out.

Ans. to Q. No 4 : (a) I could not attend office because of illness.

(b) Write your answers in black ink.

(c) The visitor knocked at the door but there was no answer.

(d) The judge ordered him to answer his query.

(e) The train is bound for Howrah.

(f) This pencil is inferior to that.

(g) Rina is married to a teacher.

(h) You must feel ashamed for your folly.

(i) The money was divided among his two sons.

Ans. to Q. No 5 : (a) Although he is weak, he does a lot of work.

(b) Unless you work hard, you will fail.

(c) He knows neither English nor Hindi.

(d) Hardly had he reached school than the bell rang.

(e) Such employees as are honest are respected everywhere.

(f) Scarcely had we entered the class when the work began.

(g) As soon as the bell rang, the train began to move.



13.11. MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Very Short Questions

Q. 1. Correct the following sentences:

(a) The Chief Minister has proposed to discuss about the matter of NRC with his cabinet colleagues.

(b) The HSLC examination will begin from the 16th February.

(c) The Education Minister congratulated Abdul Barik for his excellent performance in the examination.

(d) We listened to the Prime Minister's "Man ki Bat" in the radio.

(e) The policeman said to the boy, “What you are doing here?”

(f) On receiving the tip-off the police party entered into the premises of the printing press and seized incriminating documents.

B. Short questions (Answer each question in about 150 words):

Q. 1. What do you mean by ‘Erross of Concerd’?

C. Long questions (Answer each question in about 300-500 words):

Q. 1. Rewrite the passages correctly.

(a) Fire in Adabari Shop

Guwahati, May 20: A LPG tanker, a bus and a truck was charred in a fire that break out at Abhisek Motors, a automobile repair shop at Adabari at Guwahati around 1.30 a.m.. There were no report of any casualty. Three fire fenders has been brought the blaze in control after nearly half hour.

(b) Environment Education Bid

Guwahati, May 20: Voice of Environment, an initiative led by environment science graduates in Assam has been stated a venture to educate students of the state on environment from lower primary level to college.

The group said they have been taken the step as the state government has not taking any step to fill up the posts of environment science teachers in schools for many years.

The venture is launched at Government Girl’s School Tezpur in Sonitpur district. As a part of the programme, a seminar-cum-workshop for environment science was held. About 200 students participates in it.