

Injudicious use of the Anaphoric 'it' by English Language Speakers in Ghana: Are Ghanaian languages to blame?

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Abstract: This paper examines the wrong application of the anaphoric pronoun 'it' in English language discourses in Ghana. The paper is grounded in a content analysis research design. The data for the paper were solicited from extracts from radio programmes and writings and speeches of unsuspecting Ghanaians. From the data collected and analyzed, we observed that the third-person singular non-human pronoun, *it*, is often used to refer anaphorically to a plural antecedent. This creates a disagreement between the pronoun and its referent. This phenomenon often happens unconsciously and speakers do not usually realize any grammatical problem with this situation. The study revealed that apart from the structural problem of the wrong use of the anaphoric *it* creates the lack of agreement between the anaphoric *it* and its referent may be a structural transfer from some Ghanaian first languages. The paper, therefore, recommends that teachers of the English language should explain to their students that English requires an agreement between a pronoun and its referent. A lack of this agreement constitutes a grammatical problem.

Keywords: Anaphoric and Cataphoric Reference, Antecedent, ELT, Ghanaian Languages, Pronoun, Referent

1. Introduction

Grammar is indispensable in language studies (Owusu, 2022). In both prescriptive and descriptive grammar, word classes and their functions are key issues. Pronouns are one of the important word classes. They are noted for preventing monotonous repetitions of nouns in sentence constructions. Pronouns also identify all persons in a communicative situation, something nouns are unable to do. For example, when a speaker mentions his name, his listeners assign a third-person function to it. However, when he uses the pronoun **I**, his listeners know that he is the referent. When pronouns replace nouns, they should agree with the nouns in number. However, sometimes, the third person non-human singular personal pronoun (i.e., *it*) is often wrongly used in referencing a plural noun. For example, in an authentic dialogue between a teacher and his student (see *Extract 1*), the pronoun *it* (singular) is used to refer anaphorically to a plural noun, **books**.

Teacher: Are these the only books?

Student: They brought the rest of the books.

*Teacher: How come they didn't bring **it** on Monday? (Extract 1)*

Another example that indicates a disagreement between a pronoun and its referent can be found in *Extract 2*:

*Thanks very much for the hearty words, I appreciate **it** very much. (Extract 2)*

In *Extract 1*, where the teacher and the student engaged in a dialogue, the pronoun, *it*, in the second question of the teacher refers backward to **the books**. The lack of agreement between the pronoun *it* and a

plural noun, as exemplified, should not just be explained away as an instance of a grammatical mistake, since it is a phenomenon that is prevalent in Ghanaian English (GE). Evidence from the data collected suggests that this disagreement may have something to do with the Ghanaian languages of speakers of GE.

Consequently, this paper seeks to find out why there are cases of pronoun-antecedent disagreements in the English language of many Ghanaians, and whether indigenous languages in Ghana are possible factors for this anomaly. To assess these objectives, selected data of GE constructions, in which the features of the anaphoric *it*, are analyzed. The paper asserts that the lack of agreement between the pronoun *it* and its referent is a possible interference from Ghanaian languages.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Anaphora Briefly Explained

The word anaphora, etymologically, means back reference, where *ana-* means backward and *-phorein* means carry (Gardelle, 2012, p. 1). Though Gardelle (2012) asserts that there is a unanimous definition of anaphora, Krahmer and Piwek (2000) maintain that it is difficult to get an unequivocal definition of this term, since definitions usually lack the full complements of properties that define anaphora. Krahmer and Piwek (2000), thus, propose that any definition of anaphora should encompass six characteristic properties, namely, the interpretation of the anaphor should be contextually dependent; the antecedent of the anaphor should be linguistically realized; the antecedent should precede the anaphor or vice versa; the anaphor and its antecedent should be co-referential [a characteristic property Cornish (2010) disagrees to]; the relation between the anaphor and the antecedent should be structurally constrained, and the anaphor should be interpreted in different ways.

The properties proposed by Krahmer and Piwek (2000), broaden the scope of anaphora beyond nominal anaphora which the current paper focuses on. Hence, sticking to nominal anaphora, the current paper concurs with Gardelle's (2012) definition of anaphora as performing an interpretive function in which the antecedent guides the meaning of the anaphor. In a study conducted by Adika (2010) about the misuse of the anaphoric pronoun 'this' in the academic writing assignments of undergraduate students, infelicities of ambiguous coreference, extensive use of 'this', and textual distance between 'this' and its referent were revealed. The poor performance of the students in one of the tasks conducted in the study suggests that students might have a basic problem with oversimplifying bits of information. Again, the study indicated that students' problems may be a result of their small vocabulary size and their lack of practice (Adika, 2020).

2.2 Pronouns in Anaphoric and Cataphoric Reference

Pronouns, especially personal pronouns, refer to their referent nouns in two directions: anaphoric and cataphoric. When the personal pronoun, *it*, introduces a sentence without the introduction of its referent noun, *it* has a cataphoric (pointing to a noun forward) reference (Downing and Locke, 2006; Greenbaum, S, and Quirk, 1997). In other words, cataphoric *it* occurs when the pronoun points to a noun that appears after it. For example, let us observe *Extract 3* from a school magazine in Ghana:

It was good news for all of us. The boys won the gold medal in the inter-school athletic competition. (Extract 3)

The word, *it* beginning in Extract 3, has a referent noun phrase in the second sentence which is *the winning of the gold medal*. There is usually no problem with the cataphoric use of *it*. Anaphoric reference is when the pronoun refers back to a previous noun. For example, in Extract 4, the pronoun *it* has an anaphoric reference:

Suddenly, out of the darkness, something hurled itself against her legs. A scream tore from her throat, and she swayed for balance before she realized it was a small white poodle dragging a leash. (It refers to something). (Extract 4)

3. Method

This paper employed content analysis as the research design. Content analysis design includes the planned reading of texts, images, and symbolic matters, not necessarily from an author's or user's perspective (Krippendorff, 2004). This design seeks to study recorded information in texts, media, or physical items (Owusu, et al., 2019). Specifically, thematic analysis was employed. So, the analysis aimed to examine the occurrence of the anaphoric pronoun, **it**, and its function in the data collected. We, randomly, collected selected raw data from extracts of radio programmes in Ghana, and the writings and speeches of unsuspecting Ghanaians.

4. Results and Discussion

This section of the paper focuses on selected data that contain anaphoric-related errors. This error arises when **it** has an anaphoric (pointing backward) reference. The error can be attributed to the influence of some Ghanaian languages. To prove this, we translated the sentence: **The video games children play do not help them concentrate at school**, into three Ghanaian languages – Twi, Ewe, and Krobo. The phrase, **Video games**, which does not have a direct translation in the selected Ghanaian languages, has been borrowed in all three languages. Let us attempt translating the sentence in bold below into three Ghanaian languages: Twi, Ewe, and Krobo.

Akan: *Video games no a nkwadaa bɔ no, emmoa wɔn mma*

Gloss: *video games Spec. Def. that children play Spec. it+Neg.help them Neg.+make+ that wɔnnsua adeɛ. they+Neg+learn thing. (Extract 5)*

Ewe: *Video games wo ne ɖeviwo fo na la, mekpɛna dewo ɲu be woasɔ nu o. (Extract 6)*

Krobo: *Video games hi ne jukwewii fiaa eyi kɛbuaweme ko ne akase ni. (Extract 7)*

In Extract 5, the morpheme in boldface (**ɛ**), attached to the verb: **(m)mboa** is a third-person singular repetitive subject that has **video games** as its referent. This is wrong. The same can be said of *Extract 6* (where the morpheme **(me)** is attached to the **kpena**), and also in *Extract 7* (where **(e)** is attached **yi**). In all these three cases, we see a clear disagreement between the singular subjects and the plural noun **video games**. In some Ghanaian languages, this seeming lack of agreement in the structure is conventional; however, it is frowned upon in English. This phenomenon in some Ghanaian languages may have crept into the English of some Ghanaians. For example, a contestant in a TV programme asked this question (in *Extract 8*) when she was talking about school courses:

*The courses they are offering, will **it** be able to help them achieve their aspirations?* (Extract 8)

In *Extract 8*, the pronoun **it**, which is singular, refers anaphorically to “**The courses**”, a plural noun. Therefore, there is no agreement between the pronoun – **it**, and its antecedent noun “**The courses**”. In *Extract 9*, a contestant entreated her fans by producing this structure:

*Please, keep sending the votes; I need **it** to stay in the house.* (Extract 9)

Since the contestant pleaded with her fans to text in their votes (plural), the pronoun that refers back to “**votes**” should also be plural. To resolve the disagreement, **it** in the second clause should be changed to “**them.**” Sometimes the possessive form of **it**, **its**, is also wrongly used in anaphoric referencing. In

Extract 10, the possessive adjective – **its** – has the noun phrase, “**the words**” as its referent; yet the noun phrase is in a plural number. This exhibits a lack of agreement between the referent and the possessive adjective.

*Look at the words and study **its** letters.* (Extract 10)

The results of the study (especially the analysis of Extracts 5, 6, and 7) indicate that the structures in some indigenous Ghanaian languages contribute to this anomaly of pronoun-antecedent disagreements in the use of the English language. The following sentences are other extracts we solicited from people’s written and oral discourses. They exemplify the wrong use of the anaphoric **it** and how this problem has crept into the writing competence of some Ghanaian users of English. The anaphoric **it** and its plural referent are in bold.

1. As a head of department, you have to vet other teachers’ **questions** and submit **it** for typing.
2. He gave **his books** to the one who wanted **it**.
3. There are **many things** he wanted to put on the bill, because of the restrictions he will put **it** on the next bill.
4. Unfortunately for the two boys, Mr. Smith found **their books** with their names on **it**.
5. When she entered, she saw **three bowls** that contained porridge in **it**.
6. When **words** have two different spellings, these spellings are called **variant** spellings. **It** may be American English or British English.
7. Business and professional people suffer when their correspondence, reports, news releases, etc contain **poor spelling**. **It** damages credibility.
8. That day, I prepared **birthday cake**, **pastries** and **some roast(ed) chicken** and I added some wine to **it**.
9. Here are the **problems** of corruption and **its** solution.
10. **Things** that are being done in secret; I don’t think **it** is good

5. Conclusion

This study has accounted for the injudicious use of the anaphoric ‘*it*’ in the spoken and written discourses of some English language speakers in Ghana. The data used were solicited from extracts from various radio programmes, and spoken and written speeches of some Ghanaians. The majority of the data was collected from radio programmes. Our analysis revealed that among some Ghanaian users of the English language, the third person singular non-human pronoun, **it**, is often used to refer anaphorically to a plural antecedent. Several factors may account for this blunder. The data collected and analyzed showed that Ghanaian languages are major contributory factors to this error. This situation does not suggest that the influence that Ghanaian languages have on the learner’s English language is always a negative one. For example, in Owusu et al. (2015), bilingual English-Ghanaian language students outperformed their monolingual English-only and monolingual Ghanaian language-only contemporaries in classroom English language exercises. As language researchers, we recommend some practical intervention approaches in dealing with this problem. On the part of students, constant practice and consciousness in the use of anaphoric and cataphoric referencing would be vital in dealing with this problem. On the part of the teacher, techniques such as corrective feedback, oral presentation, and guided child-centred approaches (Owusu, et al., 2022) could create awareness and consciousness about the correct usage of anaphoric and cataphoric referencing.

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