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Markedness and the emergence of Cameroon English syntax

Introduction

This paper seeks to demonstrate how the emergence of Cameroon English (CamE) Syntax is influenced by local languages. With over 279 languages in Cameroon (*The Ethnologue* 2007), there is definitely going to be disagreement among scholars as to which of the languages influences a common CamE-based sentence structure. Local languages, including other sources, have been identified to be the source of CamE Phonology (see Simo Bobda, 1994; Massanga 1983 for example). But, such demonstrations are argued to be difficult, if not impossible, in the domain of Syntax. It has, however, been suggested that a basic factor in the emergence and development of CamE syntax is the degree of markedness of the English language structure. The intention here is to identify some of the aspects of local languages that are likely (not) to lead to the emergence of CamE structures, using illustrations from Kom, Bafut, and Mungaka languages.[1] I acknowledge the fact that L1 is not the only yardstick for describing features of an indigenous variety (IV) such as CamE, but contend that in syntactic generation, the 'democratic and least effort' criterion proposed by Sala (2006) cannot be used to describe CamE without delving into the relationship between L1 and L2 production where the implications of Universal Grammar (UG) are central. Such a relationship can be well expressed only in terms of the Markedness theory.

Markedness and the Emergence of Non-native Grammars

The concept of markedness is quite fuzzy and has, for long, received varied approaches related to its understanding. A common understanding of the concept is related to the scaling

of linguistic structures from more 'basic' or 'less natural' to 'less basic' than others (Ellis 1994). The basic notion of the term applies to the selectional restrictions offered by linguistic elements in their distribution in longer stretches of language in natural communication. Such restrictions render some linguistic elements 'special' and less productive in commuication and others 'basic' (Ellis ibid: 29). There is available evidence for the prfemise that marked or more marked rules pose learning difficulties in L2 and possibly result in deviation (Chomsky 1965, Ellis 1985, 1997; McLaughlin 1987; Cook and Newson 1996). Theorists interested in the concept commonly acknowledge that unmarked features of a language are those that conform to core grammars believed to be common to all languages (UG determined) while marked features are held to be structures uncommon to rules that apply to most languages. Most often, it is because of their uncommonness, in relation to other languages, that marked structures have been argued to pose difficulties in learning. It is in this respect that Sala (2003) argues that the more marked a feature is, the more Cameroonian it becomes. In some instances, when the features of the English language are more marked, they appear to be 'mad' and are 'tamed' by non-native speakers (Simo Bobda 2001a). Commenting on some examples of words which appear to be a problem to non-native speakers, Simo Bobda cites Plat et al (1984: 48) as intimating that the problem may be due to the influence of local languages (e.g. Chinese) where plurality is not marked, but inferred from the context.

Generally, most of the language structures considered to be unmarked have simple surface grammatical structures, which are principled, while those considered to be marked are held to be complex and require a (re)setting of parameters during production. For example, White (1981) thinks that less marked structures are easy to learn because they require less elaborate triggering experience. From a typological perspective, McLaughlin (1987) provides an example of the relative difficulties, which speakers of Mandarin are likely to face in learning voice contrast in English. He holds that voice contrast in English is an area of

difficulty for learners whose first language is Mandarin because Mandarin has no voice contrast. Eckman's (1977) espouses this similar view in his Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH) when he postulates that those areas of the target language that are different from the native language and are relatively more marked than in the native language will be difficult for the learner.

Eckman's (ibid) position as stated above involves a comparison of linguistic paradigms, at least at the surface level. This orientates the criterion I am using to strike a balance between the markedness theory and the emergence of CamE. However, I later posit that the logical complexity of the concepts expressed by syntactic structures can equally be studied in terms of markedness. This is important where logical complexity is understood in terms of the nature of information to be transmitted by the language systems. This is because sentences are generated from the human mind, which carries with it information about the speaker's social world. In this respect, I take Sala's (2006) position on the definition of Cameroon English in terms of scope and norms. He argues that the Cameroon English norm is not forms that are closest to British English but forms that are most used. Such a view, as he further explains, discards educated speech of Cameroonians who approximate British standards, but rather favours a horizontal use of English. The horizontal use expresses the minds of Cameroonians. This is in keeping with an earlier view posited by Mbangwana (1992) who holds CamE to be English in form, but Cameroonian in mood and content.

A practical understanding of how the markedness framework is related to the emergence of non-native grammars is demonstrated by Bao and Wee (1999) who look at the phenomenon in terms of language genesis. They use the concept of adversity as an illustration to posit that substrate structure and the normative pressure of the superstratum are important factors in the formation of new forms of language. Although Bao and Wee seem to associate normative pressure only with structural influences of native English, the socio-

cultural concept expressed by the syntactic structure is what actually poses a normative influence. That is possibly why the *Kena* passive, which expresses adversity, a typical Malay concept (that is expressed by *Get-Passives* as Collins (1996) testifies), becomes more productive in Singaporean English than English passives. Although Collins collocates the high productivity of *Get-Passives* in AusE (in comparison to BrE and AmE) to democratic preferences across a range of debatable usages, the association of such *Get-Passives* with regional productivity highly suggests that the concept of adversity is more prominent in the socio-cultural realities of Australians than can be found in Britain and America.

The foregoing argument gives the impression that when an L2 linguistic structure does not express the social world of its users, it tends to be marked and it easily leads to 'errors'. Because a cross section of learners will find the structure marked and difficult to learn, the 'error' becomes common and, thus, grows to be a non-native norm. While I do not contest this view, it is my intention to demonstrate the possibilities through which some marked English structures are likely (not) to lead to Cameroonianisms and to posit the centrality of sociocultural concepts in wielding structural 'deviations' from the source language. In short, the concept to be expressed by the language structure determines markedness and is equally a catalyst to the production of language structures, which can be described as Cameroonianisms. Two English structures: reported speech and passives considered to be marked have been used for illustration.

The markedness orientation of these two structures is steered by traditional apprehension of the concept: from the active-passive structural dimension, the passive voice is held to be more marked than the active (Slobin 1966). Firstly, reported speech is held to be more marked than direct speech. Secondly, reported speech is a common concept to all cultures and is less marked as opposed to passive voice, which is believed to be less common to different cultures. The reversibility of information to achieve the effect of end weight and

end focus in passivisation (Quirk and Greenbaum 1973) is an 'unnecessary' 'unusual' phenomenon, which reflects the complex patterns of thoughts of native English speakers, unrelated to those of speakers of Bantu Languages. In the words of Simo Bobda (2001: 16), "some aspects of English may be considered inherently odd, and this feeling of oddity is shared by learners of English worldwide". At least, literature in the domain shows that the concept of passivisation is not common to Bantu languages (Sala 2003). Even within the English language itself, there are verbs that are less likely to be passivised than others (see Y. Kim and M. Kim 2008)[2].

Many studies in the domain have primarily demonstrated how the L1 influences L2, but what remains actually open for research is demonstrating what manipulations are available when: (1) L1 facilitates the learning of L2 and actually influences production; (2) L1 cannot influence L2 probably because of the availability of other options.

Methods

I was motivated to conduct research in this area by a certain kind of consistency of errors in the performance of L2 students we found in a classroom test. The test was diagnostic and was meant to collect material for remedial lessons since the students were preparing for a certificate examination – Ordinary Level English. The test formulation was both discrete point and context-based questions. The discrete point section of the test involved sentence construction as well as transformation exercises with prompts while the other section of the test required learners to write short essays on given topics (see appendix for test questions). The 116 students under study were in their fifth year of secondary school in Cameroon and were of mixed L1 backgrounds. It important to note that the students are taught English right from the primary to the secondary school as a school subject among others. It is equally the medium of instruction. The discrete point section of the test focused on passive constructions, the indirect speech, relative clause usage, and the concessive clause, while the context-based

questions provided a context in which the use of both indirect speech and passive voice was obligatory.

The formulation of the discrete point test was such that the learner is constrained to focus on the object and not the agent (as far as passives are concerned) in answering the question. If the learner preferred to focus on the agent, it was considered to be avoidance or inability to use passive structures. In indirect speech, learners were expected to report what they were told by someone in the past. After item-difficulty analysis, it was observed that a particular linguistic feature, the future past in indirect speech was consistently used in a particularly 'deviant' way by 101 (87.1%) of the learners. The passive was equally found to be an almost infinitely absent feature in learners' productions with 23 (19.83%) of the 116 learners producing at least one passive structure even when contexts relatively required their use in the essay section of the test.

A regular feature observed was that students who attempted using the passive voice did so with a lesser degree of inconsistency. Accuracy of production was judged from Standard British English. The method of analysing accuracy of performance and group score was the obligatory occasion analysis and performance analysis proposed by Ellis and Barkhuinzen (2005). This method of analysis entails examining how accurately learners use specific linguistic structures. The method is used here with exclusive attention to accuracy and therefore precludes any consideration to target-like use. Recurrent patterns of production were as follows:

Reported speech

1. *My friend asked me yesterday that will you have time and I said yes.
2. *His parents said they will find out whether we truely go to study.

Passive voice

3. *The meat <u>was been eaten by the dog</u> (used for past continuous passive).
4. *The story <u>was told by my younger</u> sister by the time we arrived [for *was being told*].

In order to seek explanations for such observation, another test on the passive voice and the indirect speech was given to nine adult learners, three each, from Kom, Bali and Bafut. The cited areas (of the North West Region of Cameroon) have languages that are not mutually intelligible. The learners arbitrarily chosen for this second phase of the study were all graduate students in English Modern Letters from three different state-owned universities in Cameroon- Yaounde1, Buea, and Dschang Universities. The students were asked to transform six direct speech forms and active voice sentences into their corresponding indirect speech and passive structures respectively. As a follow up activity, they were asked to do a literal translation of both the unmarked and marked forms of the sentences into their mother tongues (MT). Our interest at this level was to find out if the different mother tongues shared some structural similarities with the English language or could provide a matrix for explaining the uniformity of the errors noticed in the diagnostic test. It was also our aim to examine the quality of production from the various learners. This was steered by the fact that some sort of systematic deviations had been registered in the productions of younger learners, which could be associated with geographical and /or L1 background of the students.

The absence of many erroneous forms in students' production suggests that the passive is neither learnt in the classroom nor can it be generated from the mind. This is supported by the fact that errors in learner language indicate how much learning is taking place. Thus, if the passive were learnt, more errors would be produced in the course of learning. Such errors will be seen in their usage and if they spread both horizontally and vertically[3], they become common usage and are described as a non-native norm.

Discussion

Indirect Speech

The nine students selected for the second phase of the exercise use the reported speech in the same way as the fifth level secondary school students. For a clear understanding of what makes the difference, I will first present the direct speech forms (unmarked) before presenting the indirect speech forms (marked) with their corresponding translations:

5. **English:**	**I**	**will come**	**on**	**Monday**
Kom:	mə	ghieh	à	Monday
Bafut:	ma	lo ziə		Monday
Mungaka:	mu	ni nto to	ni	Monday
		will come		

It is important to notice the different compositions of the verb groups in direct speech so as to understand how they are realised in reported speech. Speakers of Kom use *ghieh,* while Bafut speakers use *lo ziə,* for the English future tense *will go*. *lo* in Bafut tends to represent the English auxiliary *will* and at the same time *would* (future past) as will be seen later. Equally in Mungaka, the same form- *ni nto to,* is used to represent both the future tense and the future past as is presented below:

6**. English: Papa**	**said**	**that**	**he**	**would**	**come**	**on**	**Monday**
Kom:	Bobe	ti be	na	wu	le'h	ghieh	à	Monday
	papa	say	that	he	will	come	on	Monday
Bafut:	Baba	nsong	mə ju		kà	lo ziə		Monday
	papa	say	that		he	will come		Monday
Mungaka:	Ba kà	tsu	nga		i	nto to	ni	Monday
	papa __	say	that		he	will come	on	Monday

The future past, 'would' + bare infinitive- *would come* is relatively an uncommon and a non-existent structure in the native language of all the students sampled. The future tense marker 'will' is used for linguistic contexts that are best expressed by 'would' in English. In this line of thought, the following can also be noted:

a. There is no tense distinction in the reported clause of indirect speech in all the languages studied:

7. *Papa says that he will come on Monday*

is the same as sentence 6 above,

Papa said that he would come on Monday.

b. The reporting clause is not marked for the past tense in Bafut and Mungaka. In kom, *ti* is used to mark the past tense. The verb is not inflected for tense as is the case with English. Therefore, sentence 5,

Papa said, I will come on Monday (-L2)

In fact means,

8. *Papa says, I will come on Monday* (L1).

L2, in this case, is realised through L1, thereby showing that the transferability of structures is highly dependent on the concept to be represented by the structure in question. Since this was noticed to be common to all the languages studied, it is evident that these languages share a typology in this linguistic domain. Although 5 and 8 are held to be erroneous, where the relationship between form, content and time is fundamental in indirect speech, at least, they conform to English at the structural level to a certain extent and can be held to share universal properties between the local languages. The contradiction, however, is that whereas such universality supposes that indirect speech be easily learnt, it rather shows the difficulty of learning the structure. This is supported by the fact that the 'deviant' pattern of the structure is observed in the production of the 5th grade and graduate students sampled at the earlier phase of the study. This L1 structure is characteristically transferred to English and has gradually imposed itself as a Cameroonianism. It is common to hear students even at the postgraduate level in Cameroon say on a Friday*, Papa said that he will come on Wednesday*, meaning the previous Wednesday (see Simo Bobda 2002 for more of such cases of Cameroonianisms).

Some cultures may share common concepts, but have different linguistic entries for the concepts. It is less likely that what prevents the learners from internalising the right rules

in indirect speech is the degree of complexity of the structure. An illustration to this can be sought from Uchida (1997) who notes that indirect quotations do resemble the original utterance and do not make any major distinction between the spoken and the written. To be more explicit, the syntactic construct of indirect speech is basically the same in many languages, having to do with a 'that-clause'+ a finite verb group. Instead of this serving as a facilitator of L2 learning, the learner tends to produce variant forms of the target language, which keep growing stronger and spreading vertically and horizontally.

There may, as well, be arguments that pitting the direct speech (unmarked) with the indirect speech (marked) in learning will lead to large differences. This is not necessarily the case. In the essay sections of the test, it was noticed that the punctuation devices that help to paint the originality of speech acts were almost always neglected by the learners. The secondary school learners do not use the punctuation marks neither could they make any structural difference between direct speech and indirect speech forms (a situation that has been identified by Uchida op. cit). Meaning may be lost in the written form when these punctuation devices are not used in writing and when pauses are not respected in speech.

Passive Transformations and L2 Production

From a general outlook, it would appear to many non native speakers that passive constructions are only an option for their active counterparts. It is beyond that. In the English language, there lies a certain originality in information value and presentation in passive, which affects communication in such a way that whatever is stated in different positions of the syntactic construct receives attention, which cannot be obtained if the structure were in the active form. Passivisation was observed to be non-existent in the MTs of the students selected for this study and was not found to be regular in their L2 speech production. The following active English sentences, *John ate the food* and *John kicked the ball* were passivised in MTs as follows:

9. English: **John** **ate** **the** **food**

    Kom: John   ti min zɨ   fozini na və
              John   eat   food the

    Bafut :   John   le zu   mədzu mia
              John   ate   food   the

   Mungaka : John   kà dzue   <u>kə dzue</u> lé
              John   eat   food   the

10. English: **John** **kicked** **the ball**

    Kom: John   <u>ti min tsa</u> bal   na zɨ (vɨ)
             John   kick ball   the

    Bafut: John   tà tà   bale   wà
             John   kicked   ball   the

 Mungaka :   John   kà tà   bàl   lé
             John   kick   ball   the

The verb *ate* (past tense of 'eat') in Kom and Mungaka are represented by general past tense markers, *ti min* and *kà respectively*, (which have no English equivalents) plus the base form of the verb. Learning the English past tense is not influenced by this as no deviation of such characteristics has yet been observed in learner production. In order to guard the semantic roles of the different components of the active forms, passivisation causes a reversal of sentential elements such that the active voice object takes the initial position of the structural pattern of the passive without changing its semantic role as the affected. This is contrary to the English-to-mother tongue passive translations realised as presented below:

11. English: The food was eaten by John

Kom   é   fozini na vɨ ghi mati ӡi∂ John
              it   food   the   eat John

Bafut: mədzu mia   le/ke dzu   John
           food   the   eat   John

Mungaka:	à	kà	dzue	John	kə dzue	le
	it	___	eat	John	food	the

12. English: The   ball   was   kicked   by   John

Kom:	é Bal	na zɨ /vɨ		ghi mati	tsa	John
	it ball		the	_____	kick	John

Bafut:	à	bal	wà	kə	tà	John
	it	ball	the	___	kick	john

Mungaka:	à	kà	tà	John	bal	lé
	it	___	kick	John	ball	the

The MT translations above reveal a pattern marked by learners maintaining the agentive NP before the affected NP as is typical of active structures although that is characteristically post verbal. The MTs passive sentences are realised through the cleft sentence type which has no subject-to-object inversion from active to passive. In addition, the obligatory elements in passive construction- the copular and the past participle do not exist in the native languages under study, a feature closely related to the *kena* passive in Singaporean English as reported by Bao and Wee (ibid). Kom and Mungaka use the past tense marker, *ghimatɨ* and *kà* repectively, which could also mean *has*, *had* or *was*. Also, the verbs do not undergo any inflection. For instance, /ʒi∂/ in Kom means *eat*, *ate, eaten*, while /tà/ in Mungaka means *kick, kicked, has kicked*. In Bafut, /le/ or /ke/ is also a past tense maker which is used with the bare infinitive of the main verb to form the active past tense and its passive equivalent. For example /ke tà/ means *kick, kicked, has kicked, was kicked* and *had kicked*.

Within this context, the way the passive is used does not provide any argument for the existence of transfer nor UG as is noticed to be the case with indirect speech translations. This attests to Hyltenstam's (1984) account of the transferability of marked forms. As quoted by Ellis (1994: 320), Hyltenstam argues that marked structures are "seldom transferred, and if

they are transferred, they are much more eradicated from the target language" This gives enough reason for redefining the concept of markedness.

Although this aspect of tense distinction in Cameroon highlighted above has not yet been fully investigated, it should not be a surprise to discover that 10 will be used as an alternant of 12 where the learners are subjected to online production. Thus the properties for 'knowing' the active simple past tense form may just be the same as those used for learning its passive counterpart, *the food was eaten by John.* Here, the differences involved in the linguistic representations in the active-passive transformation do not affect the learning of passive structures. The production of English passives by Cameroonians follows a non-compositional tendency typical of idioms and is rare in learner language because the concept does not represent socio-cultural experience. Thus, if a concept exists in a language, the language in question will surely have linguistic representation for the concept in question. On the other hand, a concept that does not exists in L1 but has linguistic representation in the target language may have to be considered marked while a common concept in L1 and the target language that has uncommon linguistic representation should be treated as unmarked.

Deviations and Indigenous Varieties

Much of the difficulty that has characterised sociolinguistic discourse is differentiating between a variety and the target language as well as identifying what should be considered erroneous, judging from the target language. It is easy to identify features along this line within the domain of phonology and lexis but difficult in syntax. This is because many non-native syntactic structures occur in free variation during production. This therefore poses the difficulty of claiming whether they form characteristic and describable units of the indigenous variety whose source of deviation can be traced.

The varietal status of features identified as non-standard (with reference to British or American English) is always open to question (Crystal 2003), especially in the domain of

syntax. This indicates that much work still has to be done to separate errors and idiolects from norms. The argument in this section is not whether syntactic features exist along the non-native framework for, certainly, they do. The question is rather centred on the foundation that, inasmuch as it is considered that both dialectal forms and erroneous forms (where mainstream distinction is made) contain an inherent system, they follow the same pattern of 'deviation' as the target language feature and only differ in terms of spread. Thus, the predictability of deviations as insinuated by the concept of markedness remains open. There are actually no clearly developed criteria for differentiating structures whose deviation can spread to be local variety from those whose deviation can only remain an error to be dealt with in remedial lessons. This is complicated by the fact that "variations cannot only be formal (as most treatise on indigenisation have claimed), but could also exist at the level of content, that is at the level of meaning and interpretation" (Mbangwana and Sala 2010:253).

Deriving from the relationship between L1 and L2 in the production of passive and indirect speech structures, it can be argued that the definition of markedness spans structure to content. But, it may be more explicit if it focuses more on content given that such a definition captures the formation of indigenous varieties. In this respect, a marked target structure which expresses common content with a structure in L1 may easily lead to deviations, but may not have to be defined as marked, no matter its degree of complexity. A target language structure that expresses content that cannot easily be expressed in the local language tends to be more marked, but may not constitute a feature in the indigenous variety.

Conclusion

In a country where many languages are spoken by people who also use English and/or French, it is normal for the establishment of locally-based forms of exoglosic languages to occur. While local languages are usually held to be influential in the emergence of the local variety (in lexis and phonology), the tendency in Cameroon has been to associate the emergence of

CamE with Pidgin English. This may be possible, but the attempt in this paper has been to provide a general and more predictable framework for tracing the emergence of CamE syntax with regard to the influence of other existing codes. The markedness framework seems more plausible if it is understood in terms of the relationship between the linguistic structure and the concept expressed by the structure., Using indirect speech and the passive voice, it was realised that indirect speech expresses the concept of reporting, which is a universal concept, whereas the passive does not. Along this line, it was observed that a CamE-based indirect speech easily emerged, but not a CamE-based passive even though the two structures are traditionally conceived to be marked. This leaves the conclusion that a marked English structure which expresses a concept common to the non-native speaker may easily develop into a local variety, while a marked English structure which carries content that is unfamiliar to non-native speakers is less likely to develop into a local variety. This approach provides explanations for why speakers of different languages can use a common CamE syntax, whether the speakers are learned or not.

Notes

1. The Kom, Bafut, and Mungaka languages are mutually unintelligible languages spoken in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. Mungaka has been written, while Bafut and Kom are unwritten.

2. Kim and Kim (2008) classify the verbs they used in a study of the production of passives according to the frequency of occurrence. Verbs such as 'set', 'make', 'tell' were noticed to occur 26 times or more per million while verbs like 'drop', 'watch', 'grab' were unlikely to occur one time or fewer per million.

3. Sala argues that the description to CamE should not be limited to an educated class given that such scope does not reflect the people who use it. On the horizontal axis, the educated class, according to him, represent a small segment of people who use English and, oftentimes, this class approximates native English with structures that do not represent vertical spread- the experience of the masses.

Appendix

Test

1. You were strolling and suddenly came across someone lying terribly wounded. It's clear that he didn't have a car accident. In one sentence write what you think might have happened to him.

2. Upon return from school, you met a note on the table kept by your mother indicating that your food was in the kitchen. You went to the kitchen and didn't find the food. In one sentence only, write what you think might have happened.

3. Last time you were punished because you said something funny about your former the discipline master. Say what you said in one sentence only.

4. Your dad promised to give you something nice, if you did well in school. In one sentence, recount what he told you.

5. Construct one sentence each, using any of the following words in the list, but do not ask a question. List: *that*, *which*, *who, although*

a...

b. ....

c. ....

d. ....

6. Re-write the following sentences beginning with the expressions provided.

a. Zach said, 'I will go home even if you insist'. *Zach said he*..

b. The dog ate the food. *The food*...

c. Ayong said, 'I will kill you if you don't give me the money. *Ayong Threatened*............

d. Many people think the road to Ngie is bad. *It*..

7. Your friend, Jones, was to meet you last Saturday at 7 p. m so that you go to the cinema together. He failed to come, but met you the following day and explained why he couldn't come. In not more than 100 words, recount what he told you.

8. You witnessed the election of your school prefects, which was biased. In not more than 100 words, write an article for you school magazine, describing all what happened. Write in a style that will neither victimise you nor any other person vulnerable to sanctions from the school administration.

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