

PHONO –SYNTAXICO-SEMANTIC INFLUENCES OF YIRA ON THE LEARNING OF ENGLISH

by

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Résumé:

Le présent article, intitulé : « Influence phonologique, syntaxique et sémantique chez les Yira en anglais » vise à mettre les enseignants de la langue en général, et ceux d'anglais en particulier au courant des difficultés linguistiques qu'on rencontre chez les sujets Yira Anglophiles. Ces difficultés sont innombrables et influent négativement sur l'intelligibilité de la langue anglaise. Cependant, nous n'avons épinglé que quelques unes. Enfin, quelques pistes de solutions y sont proposées.

Mots-clés : *Phonétique, Syntaxe, Sémantique, Influence.*

Abstract: -

This paper, entitled “Phono –syntaxico-semantic influences of Yira on the learning of English”, aims to help language teachers in general, and, more particularly, teachers of English in yira areas, become aware of the difficulties faced by Yira speakers of English. There are many elements of Yira that have a negative impact on English spoken by Yira people.

Keywords: *Phonetics, Syntax, Semantic, Influence.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Having taught English in a number of high schools (including Makerere Institute, Masiki Institute and Complexe scolaire Socapi) in Butembo, eastern DR Congo, and having listened to many Yira speakers of English, I have noticed that many Yira people face problems of interference in using English Language. Therefore, Christine, L. (1993: 402) says that interference is associated with transfer; it might be positive, negative or neutral. It occurs whenever there is a statistically significant predominance in the native language of one of two alternative linguistic entities. This is then paralleled by the predominant entity being in error since it deviates from an experimentally established norm of a given language. Furthermore, he suggests that interference or negative transfer is the inappropriate use of L1 structure in the L2 system. In addition, this article focuses on getting answers to the question below: what are causes of Yira negative transfer in English and how to overcome them?

This article mainly uses a contrastive approach in its methodology. It deals with the comparison of the phonetic, lexical and semantic elements of Yira and English. It is expected that this comparison will lead to the discovery of possible difficulties that Yira speakers might encounter while speaking English.

It is my hope that this paper will help those who are teaching English to Yira pupils be aware of potential negative transfers that originate from the Yira language, and that it will guide them in the process of providing solutions to those linguistic difficulties. Furthermore, it is my intention that this paper will provide a contrastive study of phonetic, syntactic and semantic units in both the Yira and English languages.

Moreover, some definitions of main concepts used in this paper are as follow:

Roca, Igg and Johnson, Wyn (2000:12) state that syntax is about sentence formation, and semantic about sentence interpretation, phonetics and phonology cover the field of sentence utterance.

Whereas phonetics is concerned with how sounds are produced, transmitted and perceived, phonology is concerned with how sounds function in relation to each other in a language.

Again, László-Varga (2010: p. 91-92) says that the English language belongs to the West Germanic branch of the Indo-European family of languages. Its history has traditionally been divided into three main periods: Old English, Middle English and Modern English. Each historical form of English has certain characteristics that distinguish it from the forms of English that come before and after it.

English is predominantly spoken in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, and it has become the most commonly used language internationally. In contrast to this, Yira is a Bantu language spoken by Yira people in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Yira people are primarily located in the extreme East North-Kivu province in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. They make up the majority of the population in the regions of Beni and Lubero.

Also, Weinreich, U. (1953) defines interference as “the influence of one language on another in speech of bilinguals who use both languages.”

The above concepts are selected, for this study because they give us much better ability to guess, and to correct mistakes that may occur among Yira learners of English.

At last, this paper is organised under the following sub-headings:

- Background of the Yira people
- Linguistics considerations:
 - Yira vowels
 - Yira consonants
- Phonetics level
- Syntactic level
- Semantics level
- Proposed solutions

2. Background of the yira people

The Yira people live mainly in the Northern Kivu Province, in the east of Democratic Republic of Congo, along the Equator. They are bordered in the north by the territory of Mombasa and the Ituri forest; in the east by the Rwenzori Mountains and the Virunga National Park; in the south by the administrative zones of Rutchuru and Masisi; and in the west by another large forest. Today, Yira people have spread almost everywhere across Democratic Republic of Congo, and abroad as businessmen. Originally, according to Kakiranyi (1998: 29), Yira people migrated from Uganda in the kingdom of Kitara, which today is the district of Ntoro. Because of the many similarities between their languages, it is believed that the Yira people are related to the Konjo of Uganda.

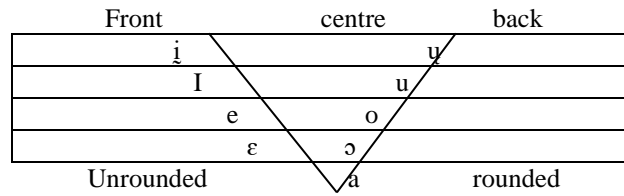
3. Linguistic considerations

Yira people speak Yira or oluyira, which is a Bantu language. Guthrie classified it under the sigle D₄₂. However, as research in the field progressed, Guthrie's classification underwent modification. Meussen made known a supplementary zone that he named J. This zone grouped languages of the Great Lakes region, including Yira, and this meant that Yira was included in zone J under sigle J₄₂.

a. Yira vowels

Bhemo, M. (2001:4) pointed out that Yira has five degrees of aperture and nine vowels, and that at the phonetic level it has four degrees of aperture and seven vowels. In fact, the vowels /e/or/ε/and /o/or/ɔ/ occur in complementary distribution.

Chart 1



The phonological identity of these contrasting units can be seen in:

- i/i: βu-sɪsɪ: crickets
- βu-sisi: a reward given to a barber for the having cut someone’s hair.
- i/e:i-βiβa: to cut the grass
- i-βeβa: to sow
- e/a: ɪ-θeβa: to tell a lie
- ɪ-θiaβa: to hide
- a/o: ɪ-kala: to be strong
- ɪ-kola: to work
- o/u: ɪ-soha: to fish
- ɪ-suha: to take care of
- u/ʉ: ɪ-huma: to move house
- ɪ-hʉma: to hit

b. Yira consonants

Moreover, the same author states that, like other languages, Yira consonants may be classified according to three criteria: point of articulation, manner of articulation, and the laryngeal activity which indicates whether the consonant is voiced or voiceless. They can, therefore, be represented in the following way:

Chart 2

		Bilabial	Dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
OCCLUSIVES	Voiced	b	d				
	Voiceless	p	t	θ		k	
AFRICATE							
FRICATIVES	Voiced	β			c	ɣ	h
	Voiceless		s				
NASALS		m	n		ɲ		
PRENASALQ		mb	nt	nd	nz	ng	
TRILLS	Flopped		ʎ				
	Rolled		r				
LATERAL				l			
GLIDES	Tight				ɥ	ɔ̃	
	Released				y	w	

There are twenty-six consonants in Yira

Examples:

1. *The occlusives (6)*
 /b/ as in i-bonga: to nod gently.
 /d/ as in ɪ-donga: to ripen
 /p/ as in ki-pupa: feather
 /t/ as in ɪ-tangirira: to precede
 /θ/ as in θaθa: father
 /k/ as in ɪ-kosa: to offend
2. *The affricate*
 /c/ as in ɪ-cema: to be happy
3. *The fricatives*
 /β/ as in ki-kɔβa: a rope
 /s/ as in ɪ-seka: to laugh

/y/ as in yenda: to go

/h/ as in ɪ-huha: to be hot

4. The nasals

/m/ as in mu-mero: throat

/n/ as in ɪ-neneha: to be fat

/ŋ/ as in e-ñenze: a beetle

5. The prenasals

/mb/ as in mu-mbesa: a girl

/nt/ as in ki-yuntura: traditional salt

/nd/ as in mu-ndu: a person

/nz/ as in e-nzoka: a snake

/ng/ as in mu-longo: a village

6. The trills

/ʎ/ as in mu-keke: a rebellion

/r/ as in ɪ-rereθa: to float

7. The lateral

/l/ as in ɪ-lolo: a sin

8. The Glides

/ỹ/ as in ɪ-θoŷa: to let fall

/w̃/ as in ery-oōana: to be good

/y/ as in er-ya: to go

/w/ as in ɪ-we: you

4. Phonetics level

a. Consonants

The plosives, voiceless /p/ /t/ /k/ tend to become voiced /b/ /d/ /ng/ especially when preceded by nasals /m/ and /n/ which is dominant in Yira.

/p/ _____ /b/ _____

Examples

Empire /'empaiə/ → /embaiə/

Employ /im'plɔɪ/ → /embloɪ/

Clump /klʌmp/ → /klʌmb/

Impossible /'ɪmpɔsɪbl/ → /ɪmbɔsɪbl/

Impolite /ɪmpə'laɪt/ → /ɪmbə'laɪt/

/t/ _____ /d/ _____

For instance

Enterprise /'entəpraɪz/ → /endəpraɪz/

Entertain /entə'teɪn/ → /endə'teɪn/

Entity /'entəti/ → /endeti/

Entrepreneur /entrəprə'neɪ/ → /endrəprə'neɪ/

/k/ _____ /g/ _____

Examples:

Uncle /'ʌŋkl/ → /'ʌngl/

Ankle /'æŋkl/ → /'ængl/

Anklet /'æŋklət/ → /'ænglet/

Handkerchief /'hæŋkətʃɪf/ → /'hængətʃɪf/

➤ The fricative, dental /ð/ does not exist in Yira. Therefore, Yira speakers of English will have the tendency to realise it as /d/; plosive, alveolar.

➤ /ð/ _____ /d/ _____

This /ðs/ → /dis/

Father /fa:ðə/ → /fa:da/

Another /'ʌnəðə/ → /'ʌnədə/

Then /ðen/ → /den/

➤ The nasal, velar /ŋ/ does not exist in Yira. That is why Yira people always produce it as the pre-nasal, velar /ng/, such as in the word “ngoko”, a hen.

➤ The clear /l/ is realised /ɺ/ as in “ómúlírò”, which means fire.

Quickly /kwɪklɪ/ → /kwɪkɺɪ/

Monthly /mʌnθɺɪ/

Live /lɪv/ → /lɪv/

➤ The nasal, velar /ŋ/ does not exist in Yira. Yira speakers of English produce it /ng/ as nasal complex.

Examples:

Thing /θɪŋ/ → /θɪng/

Singing /sɪŋɪŋ/ → /sɪngɪng/

b. Vowels

➤ /a:/, /ʌ/ from English are assimilated to the only Yira central /a/ as in “ámàkúhà” = bones

Examples

Car /ka:/ → /ka/

➤ Other /ʌðə/ → /ade/

Army /a:mɪ/ → /amɪ/

Monkey /ˈmʌŋki/ → /mangɪ/

Laugh /la:f/ → /laf/

Custom /ˈkʌstəm/ → /kastəm/

➤ /æ/ is assimilated to /e/ as in “ómùhékè” burden

For instance

Girl /gɜ:l/ → /gel/

Learn /lɜ:n/ → /len/

Burn /bɜ:n/ → /ben/

Shirt /ʃɜ:t/ → /ʃet/

➤ /ɪ/ and /i:/ collapse into a single /ɪ/ as in “ómúbírí” the body

Examples

Sit /sɪt/ → /sɪt/

Seat /si:t/ → /sit/

Reap /ri:p/ → /rip/

Rip /rip/ → /rip/

Eat /i:t/ → /it/

It /ɪt/ → /it/

➤ /ʊ/ and /u:/ collapse into /u/ in “émbùndú”, the gun

Examples:

School /sku:l/ → /skul/

Room /ru:m/ → /rum/

Put /pʊt/ → /put/

Book /bʊk/ → /buk/

➤ /ɔ/ and /ɒ/ collapse into /o/ as in “ómùhókò”, which means cassava

For instance

Short /ʃɔ:t/ → /ʃot/

All /ɔ:l/ → /ol/

Got /gɒt/ → /got/

Wade /wɒd/ → /wod/

➤ /əʊ/ is reduced to /o/

Examples

Road /rəʊd/ → /rod/

Go /gəʊ/ → /go/

Gold /gəʊld/ → /gold/

Low /ləʊ/ → /low/

➤ /eɪ/ is reduced to /e/

For instance

Date /deɪt/ → /det/

Lazy /leɪz/ → /lezɪ/

Make /meɪk/ → /mek/

Trade /treɪd/ → /tred/

➤ /ə/ is assimilated to either to /e/ or /a/

Examples

Doctor /ˈdɒktə/ → /dɒktə/ or /dɒkta/

Daughter /ˈdɔ:tə/ → /dɔ:te/ or /dɔ:ta/

Amend /əˈmend/ → /eˈmend/ or /aˈmend/

c. Closed syllables

When uttering a closed syllable, Yira speakers will tend to make it open by adding a vowel at the end of the word.

For instance:

Dog /dɒg/ → /doge/

Verb /vɜ:b/ → /vɜ:be/

Morning /mɔ:niŋ / → /mɔ:ningi/

Was /wɒz/ → /wɒze/

Help /help/ → /helpe/

Good /god/→/gudi/
Tense /tens/→/tense/

5. Syntactic level

a. 'Yes/no' questions

Chart 3

Yira question	Ill-formed question	Instead of
1. úkàbúyà?	1. You speak?	1. Do you speak?
2. Tùkàéndà?	2. We go?	2. Do we go?
3. Káβírà ànàwíwè àmòlì?	3. Kavira got pumpkins?	3. Has Kavira got pumpkins?
4. Áβàndú βánémúlyà?	4. People are eating?	4. Are people eating?
5. Síwàsī Ómùkálí Ólyà?	5. You don't know that woman?	5. Don't you know that woman?

- The Yira question (1) *úkàbúyà?* is structured so that the Yira speaker of English says “*You speak?*” instead of “*Do you speak?*”
- The Yira question (2) “*Tùkàéndà?*” has the structure of an ill-formed question, “*We go?*”, instead of “*Do you go?*”
- The Yira question (3) “*Káβírà ànàwíwè àmòlì?*” has the structure of an ill-formed question, “*Kavira has got pumpkins?*”, instead of “*Has Kavira got Pumpkins?*”
- The Yira question (4) « *Áβàndú βánémúlyà?* » has the structure of an ill-formed question “*People are eating?*”, instead of “*Are people eating?*”
- The Yira question (5) “*Síwàsī Ómùkálí Ólyà?*” is structured so that the Yira speaker says “*You don't know that woman?*” instead “*Don't you know that woman?*”

To solve the Yira grammatical interference above, teachers should be conscious of the error, and show clearly that the word order of the English yes/no question generally obeys the following structure:

Sets of examples showing Auxiliary verb + subject + central verb e Yira structure need to be practised during lessons.

b. 'Wh' questions

English speakers of Yira origin have the tendency of putting the question words at the end of questions in English because, as illustrated below, this structure is logical in Yira.

Chart 4. Examples:

Yira question	Ill-formed question	Instead of
1. úkàyáhi? Or úkàyáhàyí?	1. You go where? Or you are going where?	1. Where do you go? Or where are you going?
2. Ákàβiàsa nándì?	2. He has come with whom?	2. Whom has he come with? Or with whom has he come?
3. Ákàβúyà áóīcì?	3. She/he is saying what?	3. What is she/he saying? Or what does she say?
4. Bákàndiéndá βáōī?	4. They will go how?	4. How will they go?

English learners of Yira origin have tendency of putting the question words at the end of the question in English, because as illustrated above, this structure is logical in Yira language as it can be seen in the chart above.

In order to solve the Yira grammatical interference shown above, teachers should be aware of the error, and show clearly that the word order of the English 'Wh' questions generally obeys the following structure:

Question word + auxiliary verb+ subject + infinitive-to (or central verb-to) +

Sets of examples which highlight the differences between the English structure and the Yira structure need to be regularly practiced during lessons, especially during reading pronunciation lessons and grammar lessons dealing with question formation.

6. Semantics level

Having dealt with the problem of transferring the Yira interrogative form structure to English, this paper will now consider cases of Yira semantic interference in English.

The Yira sentence “*òmùndú áβirikwà òmòmbétyà*” (subject + verb + preposition + complement) structurally parallels the ill-formed sentence produced by pupils: “*Someone has died in hunger*” (subject + verb + preposition + complement). They should rather say “*Someone has died of hunger*” (subject + verb+ preposition + object).

The Yira sentence “ómwàná mwákàly’ókòβíri” (subject + verb + preposition + complement) structurally parallels the ill-formed sentence produced by pupils: “*The child has eaten on sweet potatoes.*” They should rather say “*The child has eaten some sweet potatoes*” (subject + verb + preposition + object).

Interference in the above analysis is more grammatical than semantic. In fact, there is transfer of Yira sentence structures in English. The main problem comes from the interpretation of the prepositions “in”, “of” and “on”.

Other cases of semantic interference are seen in the chart that follows:

Chart 5

Yira sentences	Ill-formed sentences	English equivalent
1. Námòwe mbéhò.	1. I hear the cold.	1. I felt cold.
2. Ómùóimà wáyè ákàsáòà lúβálúβà.	2. My heart is dancing quickly.	2. My heart is beating quickly.
3. Múníóirè ésyò séndè múliγóld.	3. I killed money yesterday.	3. I earned money yesterday.
4. Éndàcí éyikáyá éβùóémbò.	4. The road that goes to Butembo.	4. The road that leads to Butembo.
5. Úwíóé ómùtwé.	5. You have a head.	You are lucky.

The Yira sentence (1) *Námòwe mbéhò* structurally parallels the meaningless corresponding sentence produced by pupils, “*I hear cold*”. This is a case of lexical (that is, semantic) interference since the meaning is literally conveyed in English. It should rather just be said: “*I feel cold*” or “*I am cold*”.

In order to prevent the Yira semantic interference above, teachers should be aware of the problem and recall what Nurnberg, M. (1972: 111) states: “*Each language has its own peculiar way of saying things; you can’t just carry words over bodily from one language to another. You can’t translate words you have to translate meaning.*”

It is obvious that meaning is conveyed through words, but word-to-word translation from language **A** to language **B** is fraught with danger. We need to keep in mind that not only the mastery of grammar can help to avoid grammatical and semantic interferences in English, but also logic. Syal, P. and Jindald, V. (2002:122) contend that “*An utterance is meaningless either because it is not logical in some way or because it violates some rules of lexical or grammatical combination. There is a close relation between language and logic. We cannot accept a sentence as meaningful if it is illogical and does not communicate anything*”. This is a valid argument: it does not rely only on grammatical aspects to determine the correctness of an utterance but also touches the notion of logic.

7. Proposed solutions

After pointing out some potential difficulties that a Yira speaker of English may encounter, this paper will now suggest some remedies that may help to overcome some of these difficulties.

- Teachers of English in the Yira area should be encouraged to have a strong background in phonetics, grammar and vocabulary for both English and Yira so that they can be sensitive to errors committed by learners.
- Teachers, being an important part of the learning process, should use strategies that help learners of English to recognise interference errors and then be able to correct them. In particular, dealing with pronunciation the teacher should use same or different, minimal triplet, minimal pair strategies. Treating with vocabulary cognate strategy is needed. As far as grammar is concerned comparison of structures strategy is recommended.
- Teachers and students should check words and grammar structures in a dictionary or another suitable source whenever there is doubt about the correct spelling, pronunciation, context or meaning.
- Teachers and students should use every opportunity to listen carefully to fluent English speakers.
- In order to grow and learn, teachers and students should warmly welcome instruction and/or correction being suggested by skilled teachers of the English language. Through perseverance and practice with multiple exercises on problematic words, sounds and structures, students should be able to overcome their difficulties in mastering the English language.
- Language laboratories could be recommended in schools or English training centers.
- Finally, teachers should plan a variety of lessons that relate to language skills including listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Following the above suggestions will be very valuable for teachers as they assist their pupils to overcome Yira linguistic interferences in English.

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