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Investigating Grammatical Errors in Translation

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ABSTRACT

One of the language aspects required in translating English text is grammar. In addition to word-choice for example, whether or not a product of translation is good can be identified by its grammatical structure of sentences. Wrong or incomplete grammar in writing may sometimes cause readers to get confused in understanding the message. This study aims at investigating grammatical errors made by the students of English Study Program Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Sriwijaya University in translating first language into the target language, English. The major types of errors made by the students were related to incomplete clauses having no either subjects, verbs, or neither both, subject verb agreement and the absence of subordinators and plural nouns. Out of the six types of identified grammatical errors, incomplete plural nouns ranked number one followed by the absence of verb, and subject-verb agreement. The highest number of students making mistakes on using plural nouns was 22 (73%), and the lowest one on the absence of subject and verb was 5 (17%). Meanwhile, the highest average number of mistakes was 2.3 on subject-verb agreement type, and the lowest one was 1 on the absence of subject and verb. From the error analysis, it could be generalized that the students were probably influenced by their native language system which does not exist in English. Therefore, differences of the language system especially in grammar should be introduced to the students during translation studies.

Keywords: grammatical structure, grammatical errors, language aspect, first language interference, subject-verb agreement, subordinators, plural nouns

Introduction

Translation activity has been a part of people's needs when they are involved in bilingual verbal communication. The need of translation has been increasing from time to

time as the growth of science and technology for which people seek information increases. It is stated in Al-Salman (2007) that (while acknowledging that global market has given rise to the use of English as international language) the need for translation from English into other languages and vice versa has become a pressing necessity.

Both oral and written communication might be unsuccessful because of less knowledge of translation. The knowledge of translation generally covers some language aspects such as one of them is grammar. Grammar, a system of rules governing the conventional arrangement and relationship of words in a sentence, plays an important role to learn as it tells us how to construct a sentence which covers word order, verb and noun system, modifiers, phrases, clauses, etc. (Brown, 1994:347-348). In addition, Haegeman and Gueron (1999:16) define grammar of the language as “a system of rules and principles which is at the basis of all sentences of a language enabling speakers to produce well-formed sentences, to evaluate sentences, and to replace unacceptable sentences by an acceptable variant”. This means that the learners of English are supposed to be able to analyze any sentence using rules and principles of grammar available.

In both oral and written communication for example, grammar might be a problem for people to face as they need to arrange the information to be translated into a good sentence structure. For example they might say;

“On the corner of the street will be built a tall building.”

instead of

“On the corner of the street a tall building will be built.”

Both sentences above convey meaning as perhaps readers or listeners could understand or interpret the message. However, when we refer to the English sentence structure, the quality of the first sentence is not really perfect as the verb phrase ‘will be built’ cannot be inverted. The following is the discussion of grammatical errors in translation made by the students of English Study Program Sriwijaya University. The major purposes of this

study are to investigate and describe what types of grammatical errors are made by the students of the first language (L1), Bahasa Indonesia, in translation and to analyze the possible causes of the errors.

Analysis of Grammatical Errors

Types of grammatical errors. Translating the first language into the target language in the form of writing requires knowledge of grammar. Text translation requires interpretation activity to be taken into account such as the rules of grammar of both the language source and the target one. Cambell (1998) cited in Wijaya (2010) states that one of the three levels of translation competence is textual which is characterized by good grasp of grammatical shifts.

There have been some studies that analyze grammatical errors in translation. In comprehensive bibliography compiled by Spillner (1991) cited in Al-Jarf (2000) there are 108 studies focusing on translation. Yulianti (2007:12) divides three categories or problem areas in grammatical errors; (1) subject and verb, (2) verb agreement, tense, and form, and (3) pronoun form, agreement and reference. Meanwhile, King & Stanley (1999) focus on 10-point checklist of problem areas related to English sentence structure: (1) subject and verb, (2) verb agreement, tense, and form, (3) full subordination, (4) verbal, (5) pronoun form, agreement, and reference, (6) word form, (7) word order, (8) parallel structure, (9) unnecessary repetition, and (10) correct usage.

As previously been mentioned, this study focuses on the grammatical errors made by the students taking translation course (subject). These students are classified as advanced ones as they are in the seventh semester of their undergraduate studies and have already taken structure subject for three semesters (9 credits). From the study of 30 students given 5 short texts of language source, Bahasa Indonesia, to be translated into the target language, English, there were six different types of grammatical errors found as in the following: (1) subject

missing in the clause, (b) verb missing in a clause, (c) subject and verb missing in a clause, (d) no subordinator or connector in a sentence, (e) incorrect subject-verb agreement, and (f) absence of plural nouns. These will be discussed in turn in the following. Note that this study examined the grammatical aspect of the students' product of translation without looking at other language components such as vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, etc.

Subject missing in a clause. A clause is a part of a sentence. One of the characteristics of a sentence is to have a subject. Oshima and Houge (1997) define a sentence as a group of words containing at least a subject and a verb. This means that if a clause does not a subject, it is incomplete such as in the following examples.

The students said,

- *In order to make an open space in the house needs a big cost.*
- *To solve the problem, has been made a plan of restructuring and household wastewater treatment.*

instead of

- *In order to make an open space in the house it needs a big cost.*
- *To solve the problem, a plan of restructuring and household wastewater treatment has been made.*

Verb missing in a clause. As mentioned above that a clause must have a verb. Any clause having no verb is considered incomplete, and therefore, it does not convey meaning.

The students said,

- *Household activities of the settlement waste.*
- *The household waste such as water from dishes, washing clothes, and bathroom.*

instead of

- *Household activities of the settlement waste.*
- *The household waste **includes such thing** as water from dishes, washing clothes, and bathroom.*

Subject and verb missing in a clause. Again, a clause must have a subject and a verb, so if both a subject and a verb do not exist in a clause, it is probably a phrase without conveying meaning. The errors made by the students are as follows;

The students said,

- *In every house with high cost of construction of floating house.*
- *Enceng Gondok in each community.*

instead of

- *Every house **requires** high cost of construction of floating house.*
- ***The use of Enceng Gondok is needed** in each community.*

Absence of subordinator or connector in a multiple clause. If the sentence contains two or more clauses, there must be a connector to connect both clauses. Phillips (2003) states that when a sentence has more than one clause, it must be correctly joined using subordinators or connectors. The term subordinators are commonly used if the sentence complex one containing a main clause and a subordinate clause. Below are the examples of the students' grammar mistakes.

The students said,

- a. *One of them is by making the floating house colony consists of five houses.*
- b. *Floating house becomes one of Palembang traditional houses have priceless historical value.*

instead of

- a. *One of them is by making the floating house colony **that** consists of five houses.*

- b. *Floating house becomes one of Palembang traditional houses **that/which** have priceless historical value.*

Wrong subject-verb agreement. Azar (1999) provides 5 major rules of subject-verb agreement. While King and Nancy (1999) mention 18 items of subject-verb agreement rules. Generally subject-verb agreement describes how the simple verb or *be* verb is formed when the subject is singular or plural. Here are some examples of students' grammar mistakes on subject-verb agreement.

The students said,

- a. *The floating house produce wastes which is from garbage, junk food, detergent, etc.*
b. *Floating house still exist and become one of Palembang traditional house.*

instead of

- a. *The floating house produce wastes which **are** from garbage, junk food, detergent, etc.*
b. *Floating house still **exists** and **becomes** one of Palembang traditional houses.*

Absence of plural nouns. The absence of singular or plural noun in a sentence is a common basic mistake. Though it does not fully affect the meaning, the quality of one's writing is not entirely perfect. Some students missed using plural nouns especially if the nouns are preceded by a phrase of modifiers such as one of, a lot of, some of, etc as the following examples.

The students said,

one of the colony, one of the traditional house, a lot of settlement,

instead of

*one of the **colonies**, one of the traditional **houses**, a lot of **settlements**.*

The following table gives a summary of the types and number of grammatical errors in translation concerned.

Table 1. Type and number of grammatical errors

| No | Name | Subject missing | Verb missing | Subject and verb missing | No subordinator or connector | SV agreement | Singular or Plural |
|------------------------|------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| 1 | Student 1 | - | - | - | - | 3 | - |
| 2 | Student 2 | - | - | 1 | - | - | 1 |
| 3 | Student 3 | - | 1 | - | - | 2 | 1 |
| 4 | Student 4 | 1 | 2 | - | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| 5 | Student 5 | 1 | 1 | - | - | - | 2 |
| 6 | Student 6 | - | - | - | - | 1 | 1 |
| 7 | Student 7 | - | 1 | - | - | - | 1 |
| 8 | Student 8 | 1 | - | - | - | - | 2 |
| 9 | Student 9 | 1 | 1 | - | - | - | 2 |
| 10 | Student 10 | - | 1 | - | - | - | - |
| 11 | Student 11 | - | 1 | - | - | - | - |
| 12 | Student 12 | - | - | - | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| 13 | Student 13 | 1 | - | 1 | 1 | 4 | - |
| 14 | Student 14 | - | 2 | - | - | 5 | 1 |
| 15 | Student 15 | - | 2 | - | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| 16 | Student 16 | - | 1 | - | 1 | 4 | 1 |
| 17 | Student 17 | 1 | 2 | - | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 18 | Student 18 | 2 | 3 | - | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 19 | Student 19 | 2 | 3 | - | 3 | - | 5 |
| 20 | Student 20 | 2 | 1 | - | - | - | 2 |
| 21 | Student 21 | 2 | 3 | - | - | - | - |
| 22 | Student 22 | 2 | - | 1 | - | 1 | 1 |
| 23 | Student 23 | - | 4 | - | - | - | 1 |
| 24 | Student 24 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | - | - |
| 25 | Student 25 | 1 | 1 | - | 1 | - | 3 |
| 26 | Student 26 | - | - | - | 1 | - | 1 |
| 27 | Student 27 | - | - | - | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 28 | Student 28 | 2 | 3 | - | - | - | 1 |
| 29 | Student 29 | - | 3 | - | - | 2 | - |
| 30 | Student 30 | 1 | 4 | 1 | - | 4 | - |
| TOTAL | | 21 | 40 | 5 | 14 | 35 | 32 |
| Percentage of errors | | 50% | 67% | 17% | 40% | 50% | 73% |
| Average word of errors | | 1.4 | 2 | 1 | 1.2 | 2.3 | 1.5 |

From the table above, 73% of the students made mistakes on using plural nouns, and the highest average number of word of errors is 2.3 on subject-verb agreement.

Causes of errors. There are actually two major possibilities of causes of grammatical errors in translation (1) lack of knowledge of grammar and (2) L1 interference. In this study the later will be adopted for the following discussion.

L1 interference has been common among L1 students when translating texts from source language into target language. Interference from the native language, in this case L1, is one of the sources of errors (Ancker: 2000). It is probably true since both languages, though in some parts the same have their own grammatical system. In Bahasa Indonesia for example, adjectives occur after nouns while in English they occur before nouns though in both languages adjectives function to modify nouns.

Another difference is that in Bahasa Indonesia a subject and a verb can be inverted such as in the following:

Near the bank of the river were built several floating small restaurants.

The sentence above is grammatically correct in Bahasa Indonesia, while in English it is not. A verb can be inverted in English if preceded by a certain place of expression functioning as a subject complement such as:

Near the bank of the river were several floating small restaurants

Discussion and Interpretation

From the previous six identified grammatical errors, there are three types which have the same grammatical system in both languages. Sentences in both English and Bahasa Indonesia require a subject and a predicate though, in fact, they have a slight different requirement for the predicate. Again in English a predicate must consist of at least a verb, while in Bahasa Indonesia a predicate can be a verb, an adjective, a noun or even a prepositional phrase. Besides, every sentence with multiple clauses also needs a subordinator. On the contrary, the

other three types (Subject-verb agreement, verb in a clause, and plural noun) really show different grammatical forms. These three types are necessary to discuss in the following as they might affect language interference of the source language, Bahasa Indonesia.

Verb Missing in a Clause

In both Bahasa Indonesia and English, every sentence must have a subject and a predicate. In English a predicate must consist of at least a verb, but in Bahasa Indonesia, in addition to a verb, a predicate can be an adjective, a noun or even a prepositional phrase such as the following examples.

| English | Bahasa Indonesia |
|--|--|
| That house is expensive. | Rumah itu mahal. |
| The floating house is a traditional house. | Rumah terapung adalah rumah adat. |
| The kites are above the raft. | Layang-layang itu di atas rumah rakit. |

The words ‘expensive’ and ‘mahal’ are adjectives. Note that the words ‘is’ and ‘are’ in the sentences above are verbs (linking verbs). Meanwhile, in the sentences “Rumah itu mahal”, “Rumah terapung adalah rumah adat.”, and “Layang-layang itu di atas rumah rakit.”, they do not require verbs (zero verb). Therefore, the sentence “The household waste such as water from dishes, washing clothes, and bathroom.” is correct in Bahasa Indonesia grammatical pattern, whereas in English, it is not a sentence but a phrase as there is no verb available. In this case the students were influenced by their native language.

Absence of Plural Nouns

Unlike English, in Bahasa Indonesia there is no form of plural nouns such as ending *-s* or *-es*. When one wants to indicate the noun plural, he or she can use number or adjective of quantity as modifiers before nouns such as:

| English | Bahasa Indonesia |
|---|--|
| The traditional house has <i>ornaments</i> . | Rumah adat itu memiliki <i>pernak pernik</i> . |
| One of the floating <i>houses</i> | Salah satu <i>rumah rakit</i> tersebut. |
| A lot of plastic <i>bottles</i> float in the river. | Banyak <i>botal</i> plastic mengapung di sungai. |

Wrong Subject-Verb Agreement

When we refer to the rule of subject-verb agreement, verb inflection in English such as suffix *s* or *es* does not exist for singular subject in the simple present tense in Bahasa Indonesia. Therefore, students' mistakes on subject-verb agreement as the previous examples could be caused by L1 interference and is considered logic. However, for the sake of good quality of translation in particular and in writing in general, this L1 interference must not be neglected.

Conclusion

There are no two languages exactly the same in terms of their grammar. Therefore, grammatical Errors in translation have been common to occur among the first language learners especially in the productive skill, writing. The grammatical errors made could basically be caused by the difference grammatical system of languages, source language and target language as in this study Bahasa Indonesia and English so that L1 interference might occur.

Since one of the grammatical errors is caused by L1 interference, it is imperative that the students be introduced grammatical system of both languages. Both similarities and differences must be completely discussed during translation studies so that L1 interference

could be avoided. In other words, the grammatical errors could be reduced by introducing the grammatical system of both languages while teaching translation subject.

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