

## **Gaps and Absences in the English Expressions of Some Staff and Students in an English-As-A-Second Language University Setting**

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### **Abstract**

The use of English in second-language settings has attracted much attention from scholars over the years with much focus on the challenges that L<sub>2</sub> users face as they engage the language in different communicative events. This paper highlights a kind of English usage indicating specific gaps and absences in the English expressions used in a Nigerian University setting with the aim of identifying the mechanisms involved in the emergence of these gaps and the danger they portend for effective English usage in formal contexts. By means of the non-participant observation method, relevant samples were gathered from randomly-selected staff and students in different formal contexts at different times in a Nigerian University. These were subjected to qualitative and structural analysis, using Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar with a focus on the nominal group structure and the lexico-grammatical system as revised by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004). Findings revealed that nouns acting as the head in the nominal group structure are omitted in the samples gathered so that the addressee is left to make out meanings from the expressions. Although interlocutors may become used to what is intended to be communicated, to an extent, as a result of consistent usage of such patterns, the gap created due to the absence of content words, which are nouns, at points where they ought to occur in the nominal group structure leads to ungrammatical English usage. This kind of speech behaviour encourages carelessly-constructed English expressions and makes formal discourse less formal.

**Keywords:** *English Usage, Gaps and Absences, Systemic Functional Grammar, Nominal Group, Formal Discourse*

### **Introduction**

Communication is a very important aspect of human life. As long as humans co-exist, the need to interact and establish rapport can never be overemphasised. The communication process becomes a phenomenon which possibly determines the extent of socialisation of a people. In it all, language plays a major role. Every community has a language with which members interact with one another. The codes in the language are understood and shared for use in communication.

The English language has come to be identified as a world language because of its spread to so many different parts of the world, including Nigeria, thus expanding its speech community.

In Nigeria today, the English language has become a unifying language which makes communication possible across intra and interethnic boundaries. Its use in this capacity becomes essential in a country where there are over four hundred indigenous languages, many of which are mutually un-intelligible and are unable to meet the challenges of the modern era. Also, the English language is instrumental in making continuous interaction with

the international community, and global advancements in science and technology possible in Nigeria. Jowitt (2001:86) concludes that 'English still has a significant role to play in Nigerian life and in the country's effort to achieve its developmental aspirations'. It will continue to enjoy this status until the Nigerian government is able to replace it.

In Nigeria, the English language serves as a medium of instruction in schools and it is also a subject to be learned at the different levels of education (primary, secondary, tertiary). In the words of Fakeye and Ogunsiji (2009:491) 'English language has become the pivot on which the educational wheel of Nigeria rotates'. Since Nigerians have to learn the language formally or informally, it then becomes a second language to the learner who already has his mother tongue (MT). The learner encounters certain problems in the process of learning the second language. The source language which is his mother tongue may interfere with the target (second) language. This is what Richard (1985), as recorded by Adegbite (2009:92), categorises as one of the 'interlingual errors' known as interference. Another kind of linguistic error identified by him are 'the intra-lingual error arising from ' overgeneralisation or ignorance of rules restriction, incomplete application of rules and the building of false systems or concepts in the use of the language'.

The use of English as a second language has generated a lot of challenges both in formal and informal contexts. Nigerian users have always devised a means of managing these challenges. Examples are the unconventional use of *like* as a substitute for content words – Olayemi (2014) and as a substitute for prepositions – Olayemi (2017). As explained by Adegbite (2014: vii), 'one characteristic of English in Nigeria, which it shares with many other varieties of English spoken in postcolonial societies, is its variation across speaker groups'. Commenting on the future trends of English the world over, Awonusi (2009) submits as follows:

We have demonstrated ... that the English language has become an influential world language. We have identified the numerous functions it performs in that role and have analysed the linguistic characteristics of some of the lects of English that have emerged as a result of its geographical dispersion.

The fact is that there is always the possibility of an emerging variety, determined by context and users. However, Olayemi (2014) cautions that:

The existence of a Nigerian English should not be an excuse for what is substandard or error-ridden as some people tend to explain off their inadequacies or deficiencies in the language on the fact that they speak the Nigerian variety of English.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Using a language proficiently is often connected with understanding the grammar of that language and how it works. Most people dread the word 'grammar'. However, there is little or nothing that can be done effectively using a language whose grammar we are totally unfamiliar with. My representation of grammar in this paper is a simplified form that will enable an easy grasp of the intention of this discourse. There is the need to understand the

basic items involved in the grammar of the English language to facilitate our mastery of it. Whether we like it or not, we all find ourselves face-to-face with the grammar of the language we use in our daily communication. We do not have to be professionals in the field of linguistics but we surely have to deal with the grammar of the language we employ in our communication. Otherwise, communication becomes very difficult to manage.

In the functional analysis and understanding of sentences, structure plays a prominent role. This paper emphasises the centrality of structure in sentence construction and meaning conveyance. Everyone who uses language does so for a particular purpose. However, context and user's intention influence the way a language is used. This shows that language performs certain functions for its users. Language is therefore functional. It is this functional use of language that seems to be very important to most people. Although this seems to make form or structure irrelevant so that whatever meaning derived from the language used is the ultimate, this is not really so. To analyse the functions that a language performs effectively, there is the need to pay attention to the grammatical structure or form of the language, at least, to an extent. Sometimes, where this is not so, incomplete, ungrammatical and unintended forms could result. It is on this basis that this paper examines the structure of the nominal group in some commonly-used expressions in a selected Nigerian University setting.

### **Objective of the study**

This paper examines the English nominal group and its peculiar structures in the English expressions uttered in formal contexts by some staff and students who are second-language users of English in a selected Nigerian University setting. An overview of the structure of the nominal group within standard Systemic Functional Grammar is provided with the aim of identifying the problematic areas that are obtainable in the expressions gathered for the study.

### **Methodology**

Fifteen samples of English sentences were used in this study. These samples which were excerpts from the speeches of randomly selected staff and students in formal contexts were gathered at different times in a selected Nigerian University by means of the non-participant observation method. The nominal groups in the data were subjected to qualitative and structural analysis, using Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), a functional-structural approach. Specific reference points are the nominal group structure and the lexicogrammatical system as revised by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004).

### **Theoretical Framework Systemic Functional Grammar**

Systemic Functional Grammar (henceforth SFG) addresses both the social and linguistic functions of language. The social function focuses on how and why people use language while the linguistic function focuses on the grammatical and semantic roles assigned to

language. SFG has a systematic way of analysing sentences to show their constituents. These constituents are the clause, group, word and morphemes that make up a sentence. It analyses sentences at the level of clause as alpha or beta clauses by means of the  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  notations. At the group level, it identifies the subject, predicate, complement, and adjunct. At the word level, it identifies structures such as modifier, head, qualifier before nouns; verb, auxiliary verb, prepend and complete; extensive and intensive complements etc. while at the morpheme level, features related to word construction are identified, some of which are prefix, infix (not available in English), suffix, base and so on.

Because of the nature of SFG which makes it more applicable to speaking and writing, Nigerian students learning English are opportune to learn the linguistic features of the language. SFG focuses on how spoken and written texts operate in different social contexts and how groups of words function to produce meaning. Language users are able to use language to reach certain meanings and to perform certain functions.

According to Matthiessen and Halliday (2009:3), 'grammar is one of the subsystems of a language; more specifically, it is the system of wordings of a language'. They explain further that:

Language is a natural part of the process of living ... It is ... a tool ... for 'constructing meaning'. Grammar is 'part of' this resource. But the relation of grammar to other 'parts' of the linguistic system is not a part to whole relation; rather, it is a symbolic one. Grammar is a resource for creating meaning in the form of wordings.

In the analysis of a given text, Halliday and Matthiessen (2004:38) explain that:

Word classes can be viewed ... — that is, semantically: verbs typically refer to processes, nouns to entities and adjectives to qualities (of entities or of processes). They can also be viewed 'from round about', at their own level, in terms of the relations into which they enter: paradigmatic relations (the options that are open to them) and syntagmatic relations (the company they keep). On either of these two axes we can establish relationships of a lexical kind (collocations and sets) and of a grammatical kind (structures and systems).

The reference to collocations and grammatical structures shows that certain words are expected to occur in certain environments in relation to other words if grammatical structures are to be appropriately established. This juxtaposition of words is essential in the study of how sentences are constructed and analysed.

Halliday and Matthiessen (2004:43) stress 'the unity of lexis and grammar as the two poles of a single cline or continuum'. They demonstrate grammatical analysis as that which entails a focus on the lexical content of sentences. This is what they call an exploration of the 'lexico-grammar' of a given text. In their words, 'it is the inherent nature of language to be organised in grammatical systems'.

The nominal group is described as the main linguistic resource for referring expressions. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004:331) present the structure of the nominal group as follows:

Deictic, Numerative, Epithet, Classifier, Thing, Qualifier

They submit that ‘there is always a Head in the nominal group’. In this expanded structure referred to as a ‘multivariate structure’ by Halliday, the modification and qualification elements are identified. Each element has a distinct function ‘with respect to the whole’ (Halliday, 1994:193). In this multivariate structure, the element which serves as head is ‘thing’. For the purpose of this paper, the focus is not on the modification or determination processes. The head in the structure of the nominal group is of utmost importance.

In English, the head of the nominal group is strongly related to ‘thing’ as explained by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004:331). They, however, distinguish between ‘thing’ and ‘head’. According to them - Halliday and Matthiessen (2004:325) - ‘thing’ is an element of experiential structure and ‘head’ is an element of logical structure. They explain further that elements regarded as ‘thing’ ‘may be common noun, proper noun or (personal) pronoun’ while those that could be regarded as ‘head’ are deictic or numerative as shown in the sentences below:

- The two men are married. (*men* – common noun as thing, element of experiential structure)
- They are married. (*They* – personal pronoun as thing, element of experiential structure)
- The two are married. (*two* – numerative as head, element of logical structure)
- These are men. (*these* – deictic as head, element of logical structure). (Examples mine)

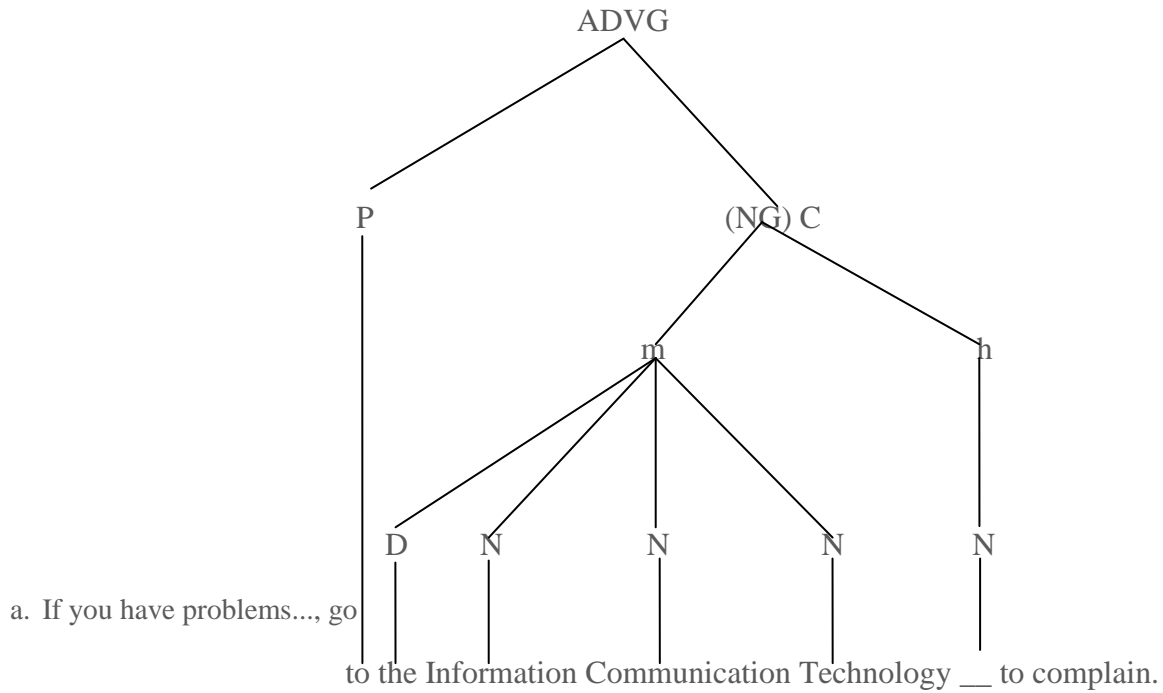
This implies that there is no headless nominal group. The head is either there as a ‘head’ or as a ‘thing’. Where neither of these is present, there is a gap. In such instances of gaps or absences, there is always a reference to a missing ‘property’. The core meaning of the referring expression is what will be achieved in the role played by the head. It is on this basis that this paper examines the lexico-grammatical features of some of the nominal group structures found in the English sentences produced in formal contexts by some staff and students in a Nigerian University.

### **Data Analysis**

In this section, the samples collected are analysed structurally. Explanations are provided to show the gaps created by the absence of essential heads in the nominal groups.

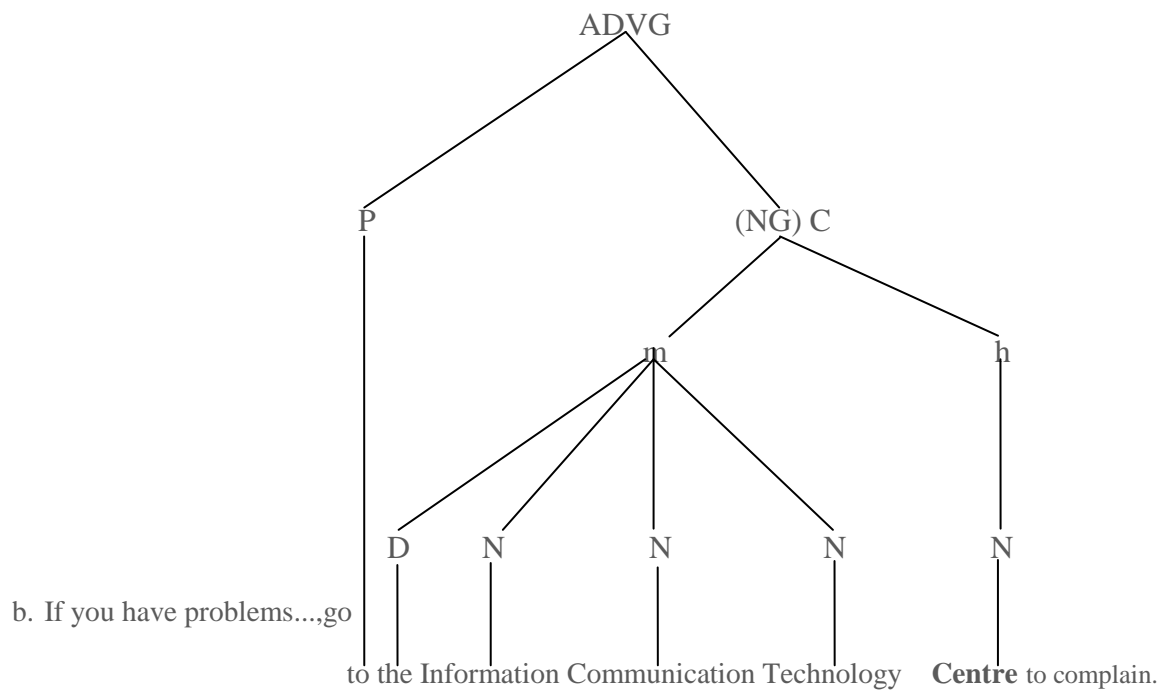
### **Cases of Gaps and Absences**

**Sample 1:** If you have problems with your registration, go to the ICT to complain.



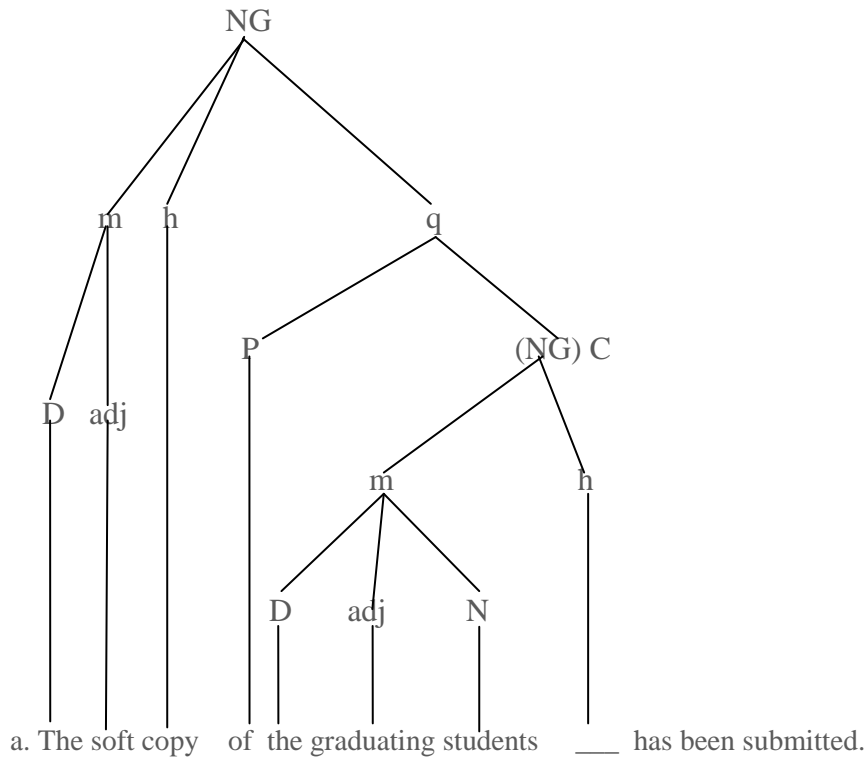
The nominal group in this sample is identified as one of the preprend-completive constituents (represented as P and C) in the adverbial group (ADVG) structure in which a preposition is attached to a nominal group acting as the completive. In this sample, there is a missing head in the structure of the nominal group which is supposed to have the *mmmmh* structure. This gap is indicated by the empty circle. Information and communications technology (ICT) is a term used to describe the roles of unified communications and the integration of telecommunications such as telephone lines, wireless signals and computers, as well as necessary software and audiovisual systems in information processing. Therefore, ‘ICT’ is not a concrete entity but an abstract one. It is odd to say that one is going to the ICT for computer-related matters. This is impossible. No one can go to the ICT but one can go to the place where ICT activities are done. This is where the gap is in the construction analysed above. The gap in the sentence can be best filled with the word *centre* or *building* as shown below:

- If you have problems with your registration, go to the ICT Centre to complain.
- If you have problems with your registration, go to the ICT building to complain.




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**Sample 2:** The soft copy of the graduating students has been submitted.

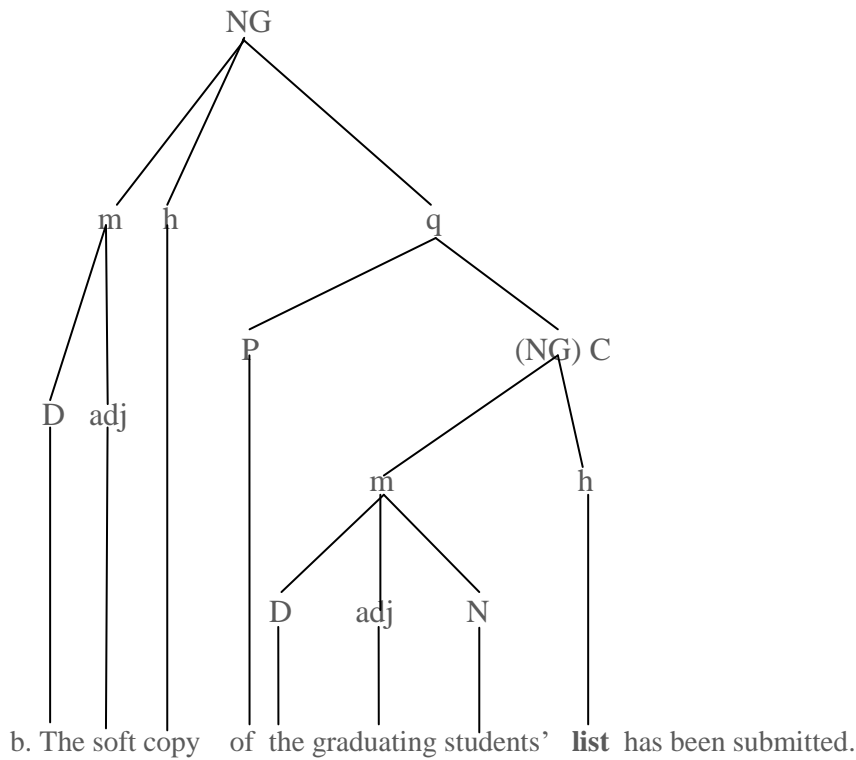


The nominal group analysed in this sample is that which is attached to the preposition in the prepend-completive down-ranked group which functions at a lower rank as a qualifying element rather than at a group rank (as a prepositional group) and serves to qualify the nominal group rather than existing as a group on its own. In this case, the headword in the nominal group structure attached to the preposition in the prepend-completive structure is missing. The modifiers *the*, *graduating*, and *students* are supposed to precede an unsupplied headword which could suitably be *list*. The word, *students*, which is coincidentally a noun, functions as a modifier and not as a headword in the NG structure. It appears that the pronunciation of the plural form *students* and the possessive form *students'* which have similar sound patterns brings about the confusion here. There are important clues pointing to the intention of the speaker. No student can exist in form of a soft copy to be stored on Cd's and flash drives. However, the list of students can be type set and stored as a soft copy. Therefore, *the soft copy of the graduating students' list* and *not the soft copy of the graduating student* is the appropriate form. In other words, the focus is on the *list* and not the *graduating students* which only acts as a qualifier (q), providing further information about *the soft copy*.

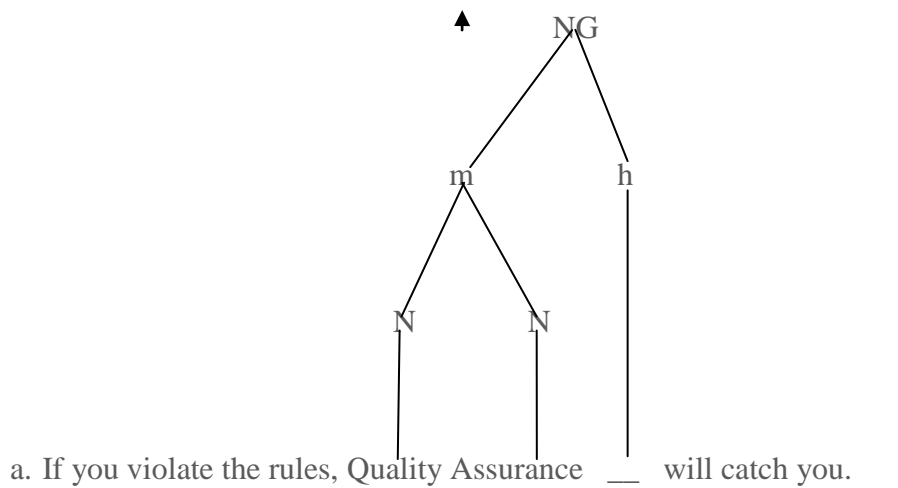
The appropriate analysis is presented below:

The soft copy of the graduating students' list has been submitted.





**Sample 3:** If you violate the rules, Quality Assurance will catch you.

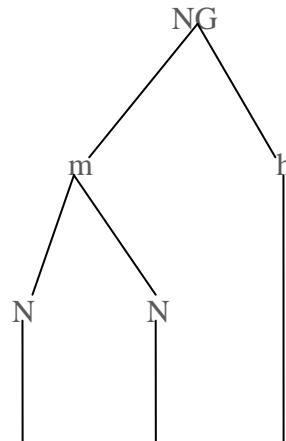


The nominal group analysed functions as the subject in the alpha clause structure in the sentence. This nominal group *Quality Assurance*, as it occurs in the sentence, requires a noun head due to the use of the verb *catch*, an action which is expected to be carried out by a body, a committee or personnel (noun). The absence of the noun required to carry out the action (*catch*) reveals the gap in the nominal group structure. The utterer has personified the

expression *quality assurance* which is expected to act only as a modifier to an unsupplied headword in the structure. Any of the nouns *committee* and *personnel* can suitably fill the gap as the headword in the structure. The correct form can be:

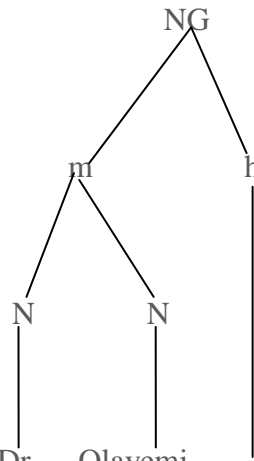
- If you violate the rules, quality assurance committee will catch you.
- If you violate the rules, quality assurance personnel will catch you.

The reference to the verb *will catch* pre-empted an earlier referent (agent) expected to carry out the action in the sentence.



b. If you violate the rules, Quality Assurance **Committee** will catch you.

**Sample 4:** We have Dr. Olayemi this morning.



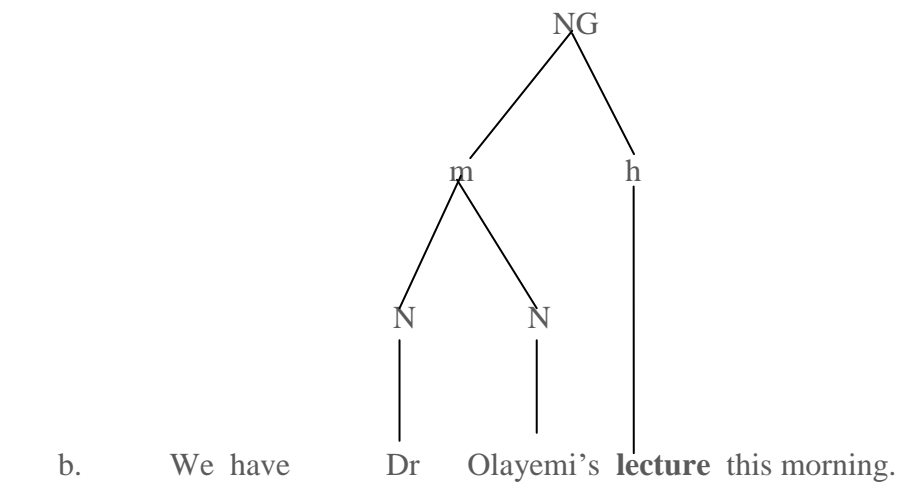
a. We have Dr Olayemi — this morning.

The nominal group in this sentence is the object of the verb *have*. This nominal group also functions as extensive complement. The first thing that comes to mind is that the students have Dr. Olayemi. As a possession? For breakfast or for lunch? There could be other implied meanings but no doubt, those who use this kind of expression have a better intention. In a University setting where students receive lectures, it is common practice for students to refer

to the courses they are taught by the names of the lecturers teaching those courses. This is due to the fact that most students find it difficult to remember this course codes and titles. In the above sentence, for instance, Dr. Olayemi teaches ENG 103. Students therefore refer to the course *ENG 103* as Dr. Olayemi. When students say they have Dr. Olayemi where they mean to say they have her lecture or class, then there is a gap. The word *lecture* is a suitable noun head in the nominal group where *Dr. Olayemi's* becomes the modifier. The second modifier is changed to its possessive form to generate a grammatically acceptable structure.

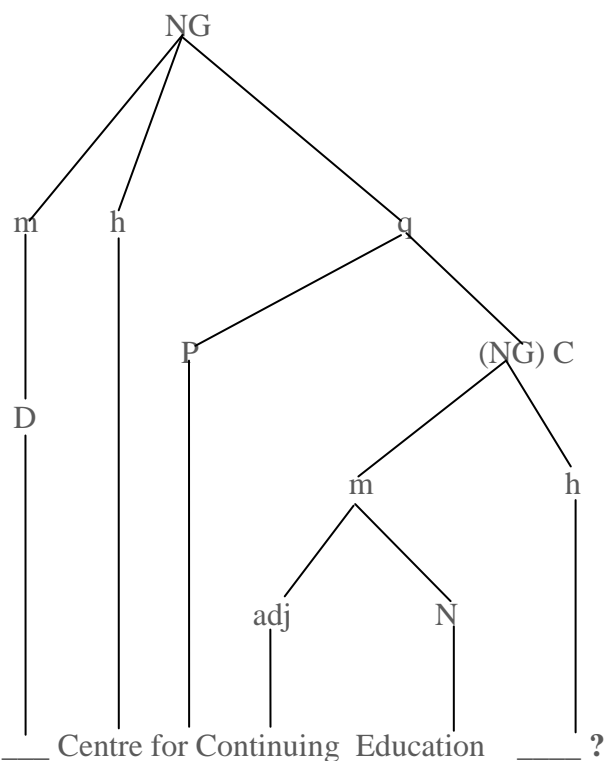
The expression is therefore, supposed to be:

We have Dr. Olayemi's lecture this morning.



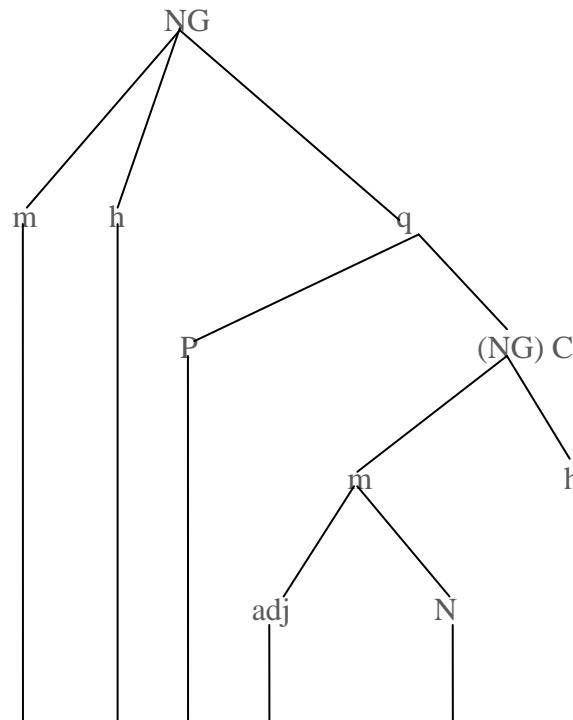
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**Sample 5:** Is the boy CCED? – Is the boy Centre for Continuing Education?



The nominal group in this sentence functions as the intensive complement. The full meaning of CCED in this context is ‘Centre for Continuing Education’, a sandwich programme for students who study on a part-time mode. In this sentence, the acronym *CCED* acts as a headword instead of a modifier. The boy in question (a student) cannot be described as a CCED – a sandwich programme. There is the need for a headword after the modifier. This is where the gap occurs in the structure. The boy can only be referred to as a student learning under the CCED programme. The correct form should be:

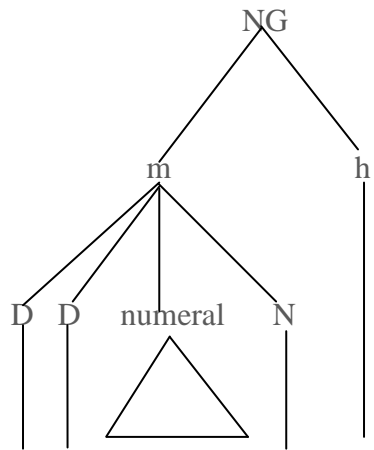
Is the boy a CCED student?



b. Is the boy a Centre for Continuing Education student?

The insertion of a deictic (a) before *Centre* becomes necessary to generate an appropriate nominal group structure.

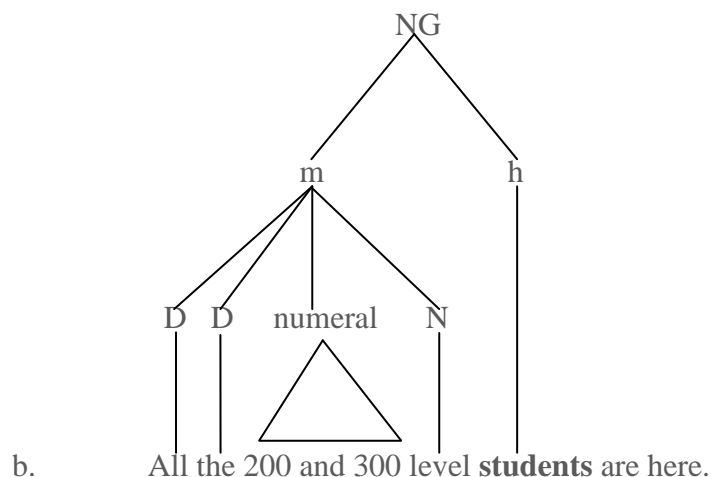
**Sample 6:** All the 200 and 300 levels are here.



a. All the 200 and 300 level are here.

In this sample, the word *level* is wrongly used as a headword in the nominal group structure, making it the key word. However, the focus is not on the height, grade or degree (level) of education attained at the moment. More so, it is impossible for *200 and 300 levels* to move about as concrete entities and gather in a place as shown in the sentence. This indicates a gap in the structure of the nominal group. There ought to be a noun, acting as the head of the

nominal group which the noun *level* modifies (note the change in *levels* – a noun to *level* – an adjective). This missing head word should also indicate the entity or referent that belongs to the *levels* mentioned (*200 and 300 levels*). The suitable referent here is *students* as shown below:



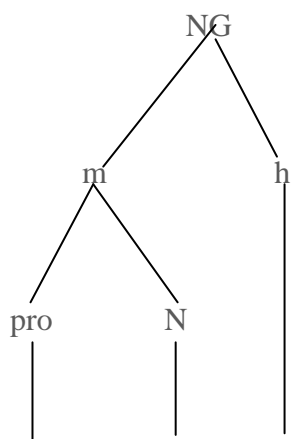
**Sample 7:** Have you done your medicals?

The word *medical* can exist as an adjective modifying a noun in a nominal group structure. Examples of such are *medical practitioner*, *medical care*, *medical facilities*. In the sentence *have you done your medicals*, the word *medicals* is not used as an adjective but as a noun. This is also acceptable only if the word is used without the letter *s*. The word *medicals* as used is therefore a wrong insertion. The acceptable form is either *medical* as an adjective (which can also modify a noun) or *medical* as a noun. When used as a noun form, it implies a plural form in the same category as *jewellery*, *stationery*, *equipment* etc., all of which do not require the addition of *s*. The noun *medical* means a complete examination of one's body by a doctor. An example of its appropriate use is seen in the following sentence:

As a staff of the University, I am entitled to free medical every year.

There is no such word as *medicals* in English usage. The correct form of the sentence if the word is used as a noun is:

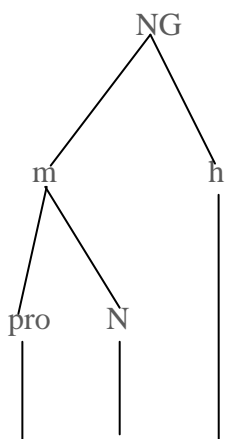
Have you done your medical?



a. Have you done your medical \_\_\_?

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Here, the word *medical* is used as a noun. However, this form of usage is informal. Therefore, it is not acceptable in formal contexts. When used as a modifying adjective, the word *medical* requires a noun after it. In this case, the suitable noun is *test*, as shown below:



b. Have you done your medical test?

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The nominal group *medical* and *medical test* in samples a. and b. function as the extensive complement in the sentences, respectively.

**Sample 8:** Have you done your course form?

The nominal group in this sentence functions as the intensive complement in the sentence. In this sample, the verb *done* does not match the nominal group – *your course form*. How are course forms done, for instance? There is a selection of the wrong word here. The word *registration* is more appropriate because it is a process of recording information officially on a list. In this context, course registration is done online by students, after which the form is printed and submitted to appropriate personnel. This is why there is a reference to the word *form* in the sample. The process of registration of courses in the University selected for this study is not complete until the form filled online by students are printed and submitted. There

are two possible expressions with regard to this process; one can either focus on the form or the process (registration). The utterers seem to combine the two processes of online course registration and the submission of the printed course form. The following sentences are therefore possible

- Have you done your course registration? (To mean online registration of courses. The noun *form* in the sample is now replaced by the noun *registration*)
- Have you filled and printed your course form? (To mean both online registration of courses and the printing of the filled form. The verb *done* is now replaced by *filled* and *printed* to accommodate the two processes).

One can fill and print a form but one cannot do a form. It is these processes, combined that gave rise to the use of the verb *do* by students who use this expression.

Sentence ii. above is the intention of the users.

**Sample 9:** The committee should have vetted the thing before it was brought to this meeting.

The nominal group in this sentence functions as the extensive complement in the sentence. The use of *thing*, *this thing*, and *the thing* in English-as-a-second-language contexts sometimes becomes necessary when words elude speakers or when speakers do not want to bother about using a suitable content word in an ongoing speech situation. Although the users are understood by their hearers, this kind of speech behaviour is not permitted in formal speech situations. In the sample above, the nominal group is represented as *the thing* but there is still a gap; the *thing* as head in this sentence is missing. What is this *thing*? Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) refer to *Thing* as one of the elements in the modification system of the nominal group structure. This seems to account for the ready 'raw' use of *the thing* by L<sub>2</sub> (second-language) users. The nominal group *the result* (with the *mh* structure) is the suitable replacement for *the thing* in the formal context where this expression was used as shown in the sentence below:

The committee should have vetted the result before it was brought to this meeting.

**Sample 10:** Let us cooperate with the exam people.

The nominal group in this sentence functions as the extensive complement in the sentence. The use of *people* after *exam* in the sentence above is odd in a formal context. Although there is a nominal group having the *mmh* structure, it has been inappropriately inserted. Suitable substitutes are *officers and personnel*. Informally, *people*, can fit into almost any nominal group structure which refers to humans e.g. *church people*, *NEPA people*, *tax people*, *INEC people* etc. In formal contexts, any of the modifiers in these nominal groups can be followed by *personnel* or *officers/officials*. The sentence above is better reconstructed as:

Let us cooperate with the exam officers.

This is more suitable in formal speech situations.

**Sample 11:** English and Philosophy have submitted theirs. What about Performing Arts and



### Religious Studies?

This sample shows the omission of the head in the nominal group structures. Each of *English*, *Philosophy*, *Performing Arts*, and *Religious Studies*, in this sense, acts as a modifier for the noun head *Department*. The acceptable form is:

- English Department and Philosophy Department have submitted theirs. What about Performing Arts Department and Religious Studies Department? Or
- English and Philosophy Departments have submitted theirs. What about Performing Arts and Religious Studies Departments?

Note the plural forms of the newly inserted heads in ii. above.

**Sample 12:** Initially, I had the intention of collecting NECO but I had already passed WAEC.

The full meaning of NECO is National Examinations Council. It is odd to say one wants to collect National Examinations Council. There is a missing head in the nominal group structure. *National Examination Council* ought to act as modifiers for the head word *form*.

The appropriate form, therefore, is:

Initially, I had the intention of obtaining a NECO form but I had already passed WASSCE  
(See Sample 13 for explanation on the substitution of WAEC for WASSCE)

**Sample 13:** Did you pass your WAEC at one sitting?

In this sample, there is a mix up. There is the presence of a ‘false head’. The nominal group ‘your WAEC’ is inappropriate. No student is expected to write any examination called WAEC. If the acronym becomes written in full, the following is generated:

Did you pass your West African Examination Council at one sitting?

The word *Council* is not the intended head in the nominal group; the students are not to pass the *Council*. They are expected to pass the examination conducted by the Council. This exam is known as West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). Therefore, the acceptable form is:

Did you pass your West African Senior School Certificate Examination at one sitting?  
Or  
Did you pass your WASSCE at one sitting? (Where the use of acronym is preferred)

However, there is the need to be careful in the use of the acronym ‘WASSCE’. Some still add *examination* or *exam* at the end of the acronym. For instance, online, there is the headline

\*Woeful Outing as WAEC Records 20% Pass in WASSCE Exams.

This results in tautology as the final letter in the acronym already stands for *examination* as shown below:

\*Woeful Outing as WAEC Records 20% Pass in West African Senior School Certificate Examination Exams.

**Sample 14:** Many of the Pre-Degree students have written JAMB.

The intention in this sample is that the students have written an examination. When the sentence becomes written in full, it reads thus:

Many of the Pre-Degree students have written Joint Admission Matriculation Board.

Since the case is that the students wrote an examination, there is a missing head in the nominal group structure to indicate this. The head word *board* is inappropriate as it implies that the student has just written the Board. This further results in a kind of ambiguity; the sentence may imply that the students wrote a letter to the Board on an issue.

Many of the Pre-Degree students have written JAMB (a letter of complaint).

In this case, the word *Board* is a ‘false head’

As in Sample 13, JAMB is a body set up to conduct Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination for intending undergraduates seeking admission into tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The appropriate thing to say is:

Many of the Pre-Degree students have written UTME.

Or

Many of the Pre-Degree students have written Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination.

**Sample 15:** When are you going for your NYSC?

In this sample, there is the presence of a ‘false’ head. The full meaning of NYSC is National Youth Service Corps. Graduates are expected to embark on National Youth Service and not National Youth Service Corps. When they provide services to the nation, they are regarded as corps members or members of the National Youth Service Corps. The ‘false head’ is *Corps*. The appropriate form, therefore, is:

When are you going for your NYS?

Or

When are you going for your National Youth Service?

## **Discussion**

In this study, the nominal groups analysed were fished out in the samples at their different points of occurrence as constituents in the preprend-completive structures as seen in Samples 1 and 2, as subjects in Samples 3, 6, and 11, as intensive complements in Samples 5 and 8, and as objects (extensive complements) in Samples 4, 7, 9, and 10, 12, 13, 14, and 15. These are the relevant structures which reveal gaps and absences. As earlier mentioned, the modification and qualification processes are not of utmost importance in the analyses.

The focus is on the head in the nominal group structure. The analyses show that the head may be a missing head as shown in Samples 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, and 12, a wrongly inserted head in Samples 8, 9, and 10 or a 'false head' in Samples 13, 14, and 15. The head is completely absent in the nominal group structure with the missing head. In the nominal group structure with the wrongly inserted head, the head is present but inappropriate while in the nominal group structure with a 'false head', the head is either present but made to function as a modifier rather than a head or becomes completely replaced to suit the intention of the speaker. In all of these cases, there is a gap created by the absence of what is needed in the structures.

The analyses show that sometimes, when there is the use of acronyms, the noun head is easily omitted. This is seen in Samples 1, 5, 12, 13, 14, and 15. If the acronyms are used in full in the sentences, there is the possibility that users will perceive the absence of an important head word because the sentences will sound odd when uttered. Also, the use of *the thing* in Sample 9 and *people* in *exam people* in Sample 10 readily allows users to avoid the 'rigour' of adopting appropriate lexical choices at points where they ought to have done so. This kind of usage is inappropriate. It is expected that the noun referent be mentioned, and where it is not, it is a way of boycotting the use of appropriate nouns in their appropriate contexts. The omission of the noun heads seems to be unnoticed by the users because most often, they (users) often regard the wrong element – usually the last before the missing head – in the nominal group structure as the head word.

The analyses done connect the components in the structures with their appropriate functions and this reveals the gaps in the samples. This pattern of analysis which encompasses structure and function put together, as obtained in SFG, does not only clearly reveal the gaps and absences but also helps produce appropriate meaning.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides a better understanding of the systematic organisation of the functions of the expressions used as data in this paper and relates same to their grammatical structures. The gap created due to the absence of content words which are nouns at points where they ought to occur in the nominal group structure leads to ungrammatical English usage. This kind of speech behaviour encourages carelessly-constructed English expressions and makes formal discourse less formal. The analyses show that the gaps and absences occurred due to negligence. Second-language users of English should be conscious of the gaps (which may be unnoticed by them) in the structure of the nominal groups in their utterances, arising from the absence of nouns as head words. This trend which may be regarded as one of the 'lects' that have emerged in the Nigerian University community is unacceptable in formal speech situations. It could make users become complacent about enriching their speech repertoire with appropriate vocabulary needed in formal communicative contexts.

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