

# SOME FORMULAS AND METHODS FOR THE EFFECTIVE TEACHING OF VERBAL CONCORD (IN NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SETTINGS)

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines the incidence of verbal concord rule violation in educated Nigeria ESL against the conceptual framework of interference and 'intraference'. Intraference is a coinage for the 'overgeneralization of linguistic material and semantic features' or 'intralingual interference'. The paper is basically intuitively theoretical and descriptive. Library research, the Internet, observation and recording of some linguistic events by educated Nigerians were used as sources of data collection. To achieve the effective teaching, learning, and use of verbal concord in ESL and EFL, formula  $N+s/S+s = V-s$  or  $N-s/S-s = V+s$  is proposed and illustrated with graded steps. The three major steps of the formula are (i) the explanation and application of the formula symbols, (ii) categorized teaching and learning of English plurality and (iii) explanation with illustration of the structural dynamics of English that constrain non-native users to produce verbal concord errors. This formula may be used to correct concord errors and enhance concord teaching and learning.*

*Keywords: Verbal Concord, Concord Formula, ESL, Ene, Interference, Intraference.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In non-native English settings, to achieve native English competence is difficult and time-taking because of some psycho-sociolinguistic factors such as the linguistic dynamics of ESL and the sociolinguistic variables of a second and/or foreign language environment. "Learning English can be so cumbersome to learners, unless it is taught in an interesting way utilizing appropriate learning resources" (Alobo, 2010, p.124).

Indeed, inappropriate teaching methods, lack of creativity and limited linguistic competence of English teachers are some of the factors that militate against the effective teaching and learning of grammatical structures and the acquisition of native-like competence in English in non-native settings. English in non-native settings refers to EFL and ESL in the main. An EFL (English as a Foreign Language) community uses English for such restricted purposes as diplomacy, individual uses and intergovernmental interactions at the international levels and contacts. China, Japan and Saudi Arabia are good examples. In ESL settings, also L2 (second language) societies, English is used widely as a second language, the official language of education, government, international commerce,

diplomacy and lingua franca; for example, Ghana, South Africa, and Nigeria. Today, Nigeria with a population going 200 million (The last controversial census in 2006 put the population figure of Nigeria at 150 million people) is the leading ESL society in the world. However, complaints about poor performance in English at all levels are perennial. Students, teachers, and writers show clear lack of the mastery of grammatical rules and their applications in their performances. Verbal concord is one of the areas in which nonnative users of English display incompetence.

Why do non-native users of English easily violate verbal concord rule?. Verbal concord violation occurs as a result of interference, ignorance, loss of attention, and distractions during a linguistic performance, overgeneralization, and confusing English structural patterns. Although Nigerian linguists now accept the concept of Nigerian English, which is at present being codified by NESA (Nigeria English Studies Association) and the International Corpus of English (ICE) Project, verbal concord rule violation is not accepted as a feature of Educated Nigeria English. Teachers and examiners of English find concord errors egregious and annoying. During English scripts examining, concord errors are not

condoned. They are usually ringed or underlined and punished. Half a mark or one (1) mark, as the case may be, is normally deducted for concord and other grammatical errors. From the primary to the university level, different modules for teaching concord abound. Unfortunately, however, the time, efforts and methods that are used and repeated over and over again do not prevent learners from committing concord errors during performance. Against this background, two mathematical formulas of graded steps and methods are proposed, presented and illustrated in this paper with a view to enhancing the effective teaching and application of verbal concord rule in nonnative English settings. The formulas may also be found useful in the formal teaching of verbal concord in native English settings. This paper is basically theoretical and descriptive, based on library research, the Internet and observation of live linguistic events/performances by educated Nigerians. Examples here are got from textbooks and undergraduate scripts.

## Conceptual Framework

This paper is based on the concepts of interference and intraference. Interference, also negative transfer, which is well established, is associated with the concepts of Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Language Transfer, which are based on the assumption that second language learners have the tendency of transferring the features of their native and/or first language to their second language utterances (James, 1980, p. 14; Crystal, 2009, p. 249).

Contrastive analysis treated cases of interference as 'errors' or 'deviations' from SBE norms" and researches and papers in higher schools and conferences in the 1960s and early seventies used contrastive analysis to predict, "sources of errors and deviations in the Nigerian variety of English" (Akere, 2009, p. 5; Surakat, 2010, p. 102). According to Ekundayo (2006, 2011), "Apparently, the theories and methods failed to examine critically HOW the rules and dynamics of the second language itself make learners produce coinages and variations, an issue which subsequent scholars in the turn of the nineteen sixties (1960s) took up vigorously" (p. 15). For example, Selinker (1984) mentions "the overgeneralization of linguistic materials and semantic features" in 'interlanguage', (p.37).

Richards and Sampson (1984) discuss "systemic intralingual errors", "intralingual interference", and "internal language transfer" (pp.1-6). According to them, "intralingual interference refers to items produced by the learner which reflect not the structure of the mother tongue, but generalizations based on partial exposure to target language" (p.6). Labov (1994) also argues that the forces of language change and variation are in language properties and social dynamics. These properties "are in the grammar and they constrain the grammar, and they cannot be described" without reference to the grammar. Further, he asserts that morphological and syntactic variables are informed by, "semantic distinctions and/or structural configurations whose development can be traced in the history of the language" (p.84). Ekundayo (2006, 2011) coined intraference, "to denote intralingual interference" or "the overgeneralisation of linguistic material and semantic features" (2011, pp.1-10). The coinage is intended as a counterpoint to interference, that is interference versus intraference in ESL. It was coined against the backdrop of three morphemes: inter-, intra- and -ference, which are productive affixes. Etymologically, the well-established interference itself is an amalgam of two morphemes; inter+ferire, which means for two things to strike (Funk & Wagnalls, 1975, p. 339).

Intra (being a bound form) has been combined with ferire to have intraferire. Analogically, intra (within) plus (+) ferire (to strike or contact) means to disturb, strike or make two things contact each other within an entity. So, the combination of intra and ferire will result in a clash or contact within a thing. In the context of this work, it is a contact within an entity, which is language. The -ference is the noun formation, meaning an internal contact or disturbance within, that is linguistic 'intraference.' Ekundayo thereafter conceptualizes intraference as follows:

So, intraference is concerned primarily with (nonnative) language users who do not understand their (second) language perfectly and are said to affect by such psycho-sociolinguistically relevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention, interest and socio-cultural context. They are further affected by the phonological, morphological,

syntactic, semantic and graphological rules, items and exceptions that characterize the language, as they apply their knowledge in actual performance (p.22).

In this conceptualization, which is reminiscent of Chomsky's (1965, p.3) eminent phraseology, two major factors are said affect the competence and performance of second language users: the psycho-sociolinguistic, and the linguistic. Now, the psycho-sociolinguistic is an amalgam of two sub-factors. The first is the social knowledge, context, and setting of the speakers. The second sub-factor of the psycho-sociolinguistic is the brain or mind mechanism of the users, the way the users view and rearrange language features creatively or ignorantly in their minds. The second major factor is linguistic. When a new concept, idea, experience, event, etc confronts nonnative speakers, and even native speakers of a language, they fall back on the dynamics, loopholes and rules of the language and (re)deploy them to convey the new experience and concept. This effort may then generate a new linguistic structure.

The relationship these two concepts have with this paper is that the variations of verbal concord and others in ESL and EFL are predominantly the products of the interplay of interference and intraference. Naturally placed in a heterogeneous second language community that is far away from a native English setting, educated Nigerians, for instance, deploy, manipulate or rearrange the grammatical rules, and items of English to create new structures or similar structures to some of the established ones in the language. This is intraference at work. At other times, interference influences their performances. Most Nigerian languages, for example, do not have specific suffixes or morphemes for marking number and verbal agreement, as in English. So, educated Nigerians transfer the noun-verb combination patterns of their languages to English, thereby producing deviations of verbal concord.

## Review of Related Literature

The verb is the pivotal structural element around which other elements are bonded in a sentence. It relates to the subject by concord and then relates to other predicative elements by complementation (Crystal, 2009; Quirk and

Greenbaum, 1989). Also, the verb has many forms which reflect time (tenses), moods and aspects. It takes several inflectional and derivational affixes. These inherent dynamics of the verb enable the intraference of verb morphemes. Since Nigeria English as a Second Language (NESL) is often studied against the standard of British English, Salami in Jowitt (1991) says that all forms of variations in Nigerian English which cannot be found in native English are 'errors of a sort' (Jowitt, 1991, p.29). Verbal concord errors are seriously frowned at in Educated Nigerian English (ENE). Consequently, some Nigerian grammarians have listed many cases of verbal errors in their textbooks. Jowitt and Nhamonu (1985) have many of such verb errors. Ogbulogo (2005, 2009) regards concord as problem areas in verbs. Similarly, in ENE, according to Dadzie (2009):

There is the distinction shown between verbs and nouns in their syntactic relationships and, in modern English, this is even more the case as the same words get used as a noun or a verb, the category being known only through function. Thus we have,

1. (a) Will you chair this section?

Where chair is a verb although it is more easily considered as a noun. This however is sometimes carried a little too far as in,

(b) \*Will you chairman this session?

Which is normally unacceptable, but may also be seen as evidence of NE. Or is it a sign that NE uses this device {conversion} much more than SBE? The latter seems likely, as analogy tends to be an easy way out particularly in second language situations. Hence we hear such sentences as,

2. \*Where did you school? (p.93)

Convincing statistics of poor performances and progressive decline in the standard of Nigeria ESL users, particularly in phonology and syntax, have been presented from time to time (Alo, 2005; Alobu, 2010; Agbaje, 2009; Ibe, 2007). In Syntax, one of the most problematic areas is verbal concord, which is evanescent and confusing to non-native English users as a result of many psycho-sociolinguistic factors. Asiyambola (1998), Babalola (1999)

and Ojo (2009) also confirm that the verbal group and forms constitute difficulties to Nigeria Yoruba users of English as a Second Language. Ojo for instance says:

The verbal group is the only obligatory element in the sentences which confers on it certain peculiarities and restrictions that a second language user of English cannot afford to ignore. However, what has been observed is the multiplicity of errors committed at the verbal group level. The undergraduate users of English are not left out of this, as they do not seem to obey simple grammatical rules governing the use of the verbal elements, hence the ridiculous nature of their errors (p.133).

Ibe (2007) equally observes that, "the usage of verbs is one area where the performance of students (up to the tertiary institution) in this country is rather woeful and continues to get more so.... The level of expression of English of many undergraduates (and even graduates) of our higher institutions is, to put it simply, unbelievable" (pp.260-261). The 'epidemic' of grammatical errors has reached even scholarly articles for journals, for during proofreading and assessment, one regularly comes across concord and other errors. Oluikpe's finding (2007) further shows "a general low achievement rate at all levels of competence, particularly grammatical competence" (p.275).

The question is what makes students and other ESL users often produce deviations of verb forms and concord? Fatusin (2004) fingers the agents of learning, environment and society as major causes. As pointed out in the theoretical framework, the dynamics of the language, structural patterns, context and interference make non-native users produce deviations of verbal concord and others. Consequently in this paper, some formulas and methods have been put forward to be adopted for the teaching of verbal concord structures, explanation of the nature and dynamics of nouns and verbal concord with few exemptions and the structural patterns that make non-native English users violate the formula and rule of verbal concord.

## Discussions

### Verbal Concord Formula

Step one should be the introduction and explanation of the

proposed formula as follows:

$$S-s = V + s, \text{ or } S+s = V-s.$$

Alternatively, it can be stated as,

$$N-s = V+s, \text{ or } N+s=V-s.$$

This can be simplified as where 'S' or 'N' has no 's', then 'V' will have or should have 's' or where 'S' or 'N' has '+s', then 'V' will or should not have 's'. What then are the values of 'S', 'N', 'V', '+s' and '-s'? The values or meanings of 'S' is Subject and the value of '-s' (minus 's') is singular/singularity or the absence of the plural morpheme and its allomorphs (-s, -es, -ies) in the noun or noun phrase that is the subject of a sentence. 'N' is noun or nominal. The meaning of 'V' is verb and the meaning of V+s is that the verb is singular or has the presence of -s, -es or -ies in it, that is that it is inflected with the singular morpheme marker. V-s (v minus 's') means that there is no -s, -es and -ies in the verb. In English, plural subjects are inflected with -s, -es and -ies in the main; hence Subject+s (S+s). A singular subject is not usually inflected with the plural -s, -es or -ies, hence Subject ('S') minus 's' (S-s). Subjects are usually nouns or nominals, hence N+s or N-s.

Conversely, verbs go the opposite of nouns in marking plurality. While a singular noun takes no -s, -es, or -ies, a singular verb takes them. For example, the plural of boy is boys (boy+s) and the singular is boy (minus '-s'). Contrarily, the singular form of the verb take is takes, which is V+s, and the plural is take, which is V-s. In sentence construction, these opposites combine to achieve correct verbal concord. Verbal concord is the agreement of the subject and verb of a clause or sentence in terms of number and meaning. Accordingly, both the 'S' or 'N' (subject or noun) and 'V' (verb) of an English sentence cannot contain -s, -es or -ies, or both not having them at the same time, as in these sentences:

The boys	is	stronger than the girls.*
S+s =	V+s	
She usually	don't go	to church punctually.*
S-s =	V-s	

These sentences have violated this verbal concord formula.

To correct them, we apply the principle of S+s = V-s or S-s

= V+s as follows:

The boys	are	stronger than the girls .√
S+s	V-s	
She	usually goes	to church punctually.√
S+s	V-s	

### The Grammatical Nature of S+s

In order to apply this formula correctly, the grammatical nature of S+s/N+s or S-s/N-s and V+s or V-s should be understood and clearly presented. While S+s and S-s are dynamic and changing, V+s or V-s is fixed, never changing. What this means is that V+s always has a physical -s, -es or -ies (that can be seen). However, S+s/N-s and S-s/N-s is not so predictable. Hence the dynamic nature of 'S' or 'N' should be explained and understood. The value of S+s or N+s is plurality and that of S-s or N-s is singularity. A subject +s, -es or -ies shows plural number and S-s indicates that the subject is singular:

A	B
The boys... (S+s/N+s)	A boy... (S-S/N-s)
Some churches... (S+s/N-s) vs	The church... (S-s/N-s)
Several flies... (S+s/N-s)	One fly... (S-s/N-s)

S+s/N-s can come in two ways. First, "S" or "N" (subject/noun) can manifest with the physical plural morpheme, as in group A above. Second, "S"/ "N" can show without a physical surface structure plural morpheme, but with a deep structure unseen plural morpheme. This is where the delicate nature of S+s lies (See group 3 nouns listed below). Since the value of S+s is plurality or plural number, it means that any subject (S/N) that is plural in meaning, whether it has surface structure 's' or not, should be regarded as S+s/N+s. Indeed, many plural nouns have no surface structure 's,' but are treated as plural and so should be assigned S+s or N+s. Examples are stationery, personnel and staff:

Academic staff	have called off	their strike.
S+s	=	V-s

### The Teaching of plurality

For the effective teaching, understanding and application of this formula, plurality in English has to be taught methodically either as a prelude to verbal concord or as a

third step in conjunction with concord teaching. The plurality system of English should be well taught to nonnative speakers before concord, for some psychosociolinguistic factors like the way plurality and concord are taught, the confusing nature of nouns forms, particularly mass nouns, and English sentence patterns make nonnative speakers produce concord errors. Nouns should be classified into ten (10) groups. Group one (1) should be regular nouns which take the well known plural inflectional morpheme and its allomorphs (-s, -es, -ies,), while group two (2) should be irregular nouns which take -en and -ives and undergo internal structural changes like suppletion and vocalic changes, as in man-men, woman-women, thief-thieves, ox-oxen. Group three (3) should be mass nouns that are regularly treated as S+s/N+s in all contexts even though they have no surface 's'(as in, jewellery, police and cattle). Category four (4) should contain mass nouns which are used as S-s/N-s, that is to say that even though they refer to many collections of its kind, they usually take singular V+s for concord in most cases, as in information, advice and news. Group five (5) is a list of summation plurals like pliers, knickers, etc while six (6) should be pluralia tantums such as outskirts, wages, damages. Class seven (7) should be mass nouns which have double plurality that are used in two different contexts, the first having no surface plural marker, and the second form having a surface -s, -es, or -ies marker which denotes plurality and an added meaning of varieties, differences and backgrounds, as in fish- fishes, property-properties, people-peoples. Group six (8) should be mass nouns that can take either singular or plural concord depending on the context of use; for example, series, species, offspring. Category nine (9) are compound words plurality and lastly, class ten (10) should be words of foreign origin whose spellings and plurals may constitute challenges to foreign learners. They are presented below:

Group 1: -s, -es, -ies,, -en, -e-, ives plurals.

S-s/N-s: book, box, fly, wish, texts, etc.

S +s/N+s: books, boxes, flies, wishes, texts:

The book	is on	the table. (b)	The books	are on	the table.
S-s/N-s	=	V+s		=	S+s/N+s
					V-s

Group 2: -en, -ives and vocalic/phonemic change.

N-s: Ox, child, brother, man, woman, thief, self, etc

N+s: Oxen, children, brethren, men, women, thieves, selves.

Group 3: Unmarked plural collective nouns which take plural concord in all contexts.

S+s/N+s: the police, the clergy, cattle, swine, deer, sheep, furniture, folk, poultry, vermin, livestock, the rich, the poor, stationery, personnel, jewellery, staff, imagery, machinery, labyrinth, equipment, livestock, wear, confectionary, the elite, the intelligentsia, the media, a majority of, a number of, slang, vocabulary, etc:

The police	have	arrested the criminal.
S+s =	V-s	

Group 4: Collective nouns that usually take singular verb for concord.

In this category are collective nouns that are treated as singular words. Unlike those in group 3, they can take the plural marker in some context to denote types and varieties.

a. Singular minus -s but referring to many things or persons as an entity:

Army, board, community, company, corporation, council, couple, crew, crowd, department, enemy, faculty, chalk, family, federation, firm, flock, gang, generation, government, group, herd, institute, opposition, minority, jury, party, bard, bandit, bundle, population, exam, union, queue, the public, the press, society, drainage, incidence, intake, bundle.

b. Plural +s referring to two or more groups and varieties of many things or persons as an entity:

Armies, boards, communities, companies, corporations, councils, couples, crews, \*crowds, departments, enemies, faculties, \*chalks, families, federations, firms, flocks, gangs, generations, governments, groups, herds, institutes, oppositions, \*minorities, \*juries, parties, bards, bandits, bundles, populations, exams, unions, queues, \*\*the publics, \*\*the presses, societies, \*drainages, \*incidences, \*intakes, bundles, etc.

The ones with single asterisk are rare or wrong usage while double asterisks are clearly wrong and not used.

Group 5: Summation Plurals.

"Summation plurals denote tools, instruments, and articles of dress consisting of two equal parts which are joined together" (Quirk, Leech, Greenbaum and Svartvik, 1985, p.301). They are treated as plurals in all contexts.

Scissors, trousers, pants, knickers, suspenders, glasses, lenses, boxers, compasses, undies, brassieres, pyjamas/pyjamas, braces, breeches, jeans, shots, trunks, shades, tights, \*shoes, \*socks, handcuffs, binoculars, pincers, tongs, tweezers, scales, clippers, forceps, shears, pliers, etc.

The ones that are asterisked are not joined together. Summation plurals are problematic to second language users, particularly the educated Nigerians of this study. Influenced by interference and intraference, the average educated Nigerian user of English tends to extend the rule of singularity to summation plurals. In most Nigerian languages, a summation plural tool or dress is seen as one, not as two parts in one. They are regularly treated as concrete countable nouns, which can take numerals and other determiners. In Nigeria, a Yoruba or Igbo speaker would say:

a. Mo ra sokoto meeji lo ja lano (Yoruba).

b. Azutara m traza abuo na ahia unya ahu (Ibo), or, Egotara m traza abuo na-ahia eche gara aga (Ibo).

The English direct translation of these expressions is, "I bought two trousers at the market yesterday." SBE for this is, "I bought two pairs of trousers at the market yesterday." As a result of this interference mind set, one hears and reads expressions like the ones below by educated Nigerian speakers:

a. I bought one trouser\*

b. I have ten trousers\*

c. Where is my short knicker?\*

d. I have a green swimming pant.\*

e. I put three pants on the rope outside.\*

Apart from interference, intraference also influences non-native speakers to overgeneralize English plurality rule. Accordingly, singular words do not take the plural morpheme (marker) while plural words do. Nigerians see

summation plurals as plurals. To make them singular, some educated speakers do remove the *-s*, as in this conversation:

Speaker A: Please, get me that plier.

Speaker B: I can't find any plier, but spanners here.

Speaker A: Check very well. I have two pliers there, a small plier and a big one.

The next example is a conversation between two students on campus:

Speaker A: I have lost my eye glass again.

Speaker B: Again? What is happening to you? How many glasses have you lost this year?

Many a second language learner has the impression that summation plurals operate as regular count nouns which do not take plural *-s* marker for singular. To make them singular, therefore, they often drop the *-s*. However, English teachers in ESL and EFL societies should take pains to stress the potential of interference and intraference in the use of these nouns. In SBE, summation plurals take the phrase 'a pair of' to indicate singular or plural. The *-s* is retained in all contexts:

- a. I bought a pair of trousers at the market yesterday
- b. I have ten pairs of trousers.
- c. Where are my short knickers? (either singular or plural).
- d. I put three pairs of pants on the rope outside.
- e. My trousers are fine (one or more).
- f. My pair of trousers is fine (one).
- g. My glasses are missing again, or my pair of glasses is missing again.

Group 6: Pluralia tantums (S+s/N+s) and double plurality

These are nouns that end with *+s* in usage and spelling, not necessarily denoting plural. It may be plural or singular. At times, in some contexts, the *+s* may be dropped, and when this happens, the meaning of the word changes. For example damages and amends. Without the *+s*, they will be damage and amend respectively, which do not have the same meanings as damages and amends. A number of them are listed below:

Damages, accommodations, amends, archives, arms,

alms, ashes, grounds, auspices, clothes, credentials, manners, surroundings, premises, clubs, diamonds, hearts, spades (games), spirits, dregs, funds, grassroots, guts, heads or tails, honours, humanities, the arts, letters, lodgings, looks, minutes (of a meeting), odds, pains (efforts, care, trouble), particulars, public relations, stairs, steps, thanks, troops, outskirts, valuables, savings, wages, allowances, wits, writings, personal effects, belongings, authorities, species, series, etc.

Like summation plurals, interference and intraference equally influence the use of these nouns and their verbal concord in nonnative settings. Most nonnative speakers tend to treat them as singular-plural, the singular being without *-s*, and plural having *-s*, as in these examples:

- a. He is in high spirit.\*
- b. On what ground are you doing this?\*
- c. I live in the outskirts of Benin City.\*

Again, teachers of English as a second language ought to stress that the *+s* in these words is part of the normal spelling and usage. However, there exist the homographs/homonyms of these words without *-s*, whose meanings are singular and different; for example, look is different from looks, so is spirit different from spirits, even though they share the same base or root.

Group 7: Collective nouns with Double Plurality

They are like nouns in group 6. Nouns in this class operate two kinds of plurality, one without a plural marker and another with a plural marker. A good example is fruit/fruits. Fruit without 's' can be singular or plural: I have some guava fruit in a plate for you (many guava). He sells fruits at the King's Market (different types). The plural marker in this category of nouns often denotes varieties, differences and/or added meanings:

- (a) Either singular or plural: property, fruit, fish, oil, beverage, food, meat, pain, vegetable, water, land, ground, money, accommodation, character, work.
- (b) Plurals Only: properties, people/people, fruits, fishes, oils, beverages, foods, meats, pains, vegetables, waters, lands, grounds, moneys/monies, accommodations, characters, works, grasses, etc.

Group 8:

In group 8 are collective nouns which in usage can take either singular or plural verb for concord, depending on the speaker, the intended meaning and context. However, they hardly take the indefinite article:

Barracks, craft, crossroads, data, graffiti, dice, gallows, headquarters, innings, kernels, species, offspring, oats, mews, means, links, slang, imagery, parastatal, gold, information, news, chalk, advice, gold, abuse, incidence, intake, wear, issue (child/ren).

Again, intraference and interference largely influence the way educated nonnative speakers use these collective nouns. When nonnative speakers use them to denote a singular occurrence or place, they drop -s and add the plural marker -s when they use them to denote plural numbers, events and places. Also, they regularly use the indefinite articles a and an to premodify them, as in the following examples:

- a. I have an information to give you.\*
- b. He is now working at the State Police Headquarter.\*
- c. She has an offspring.\*
- d. They have four offsprings.\*
- e. We need an advice from you sir.\*
- f. He is a staff\*

Group 9: Plurality for Compound Words.

Plurality for compound words is not a one-way rule. The nature of the grammatical elements determines which of the elements is marked for numbers. They come in four ways: plural in the first part of the compound (as in commander-in-chief- commanders-in-chief, notary public--notaries public); plural in the second element (as in sit up—sit ups, wristwatch—wristwatches); plural in either element (as in mother-in-law—mothers-in-law, or mother-in-laws, attorney general- attorneys generals, or attorney generals) and plural in the two elements (as in manservant-menservants, woman leader- women leaders).

Group 10: Foreign Plurals.

The plurals of foreign words used in English confuse many ESL users because they are very many and their plural natures and rules are either regular or irregular, or both regular and irregular, or they retain their foreign plurals. They

come with different inflectional endings to which ESL speakers at times arbitrarily apply the regular plural markers, thereby fabricating wrong plural nouns and consequently wrong verbal concord. A president of an English-speaking African country said as follows in a television broadcast: "Let the people design a criteria to score our performance." Obviously in his thinking, criteria is the singular form and criterias the plural. This instance is not interference but intraference: the overgeneralisation of the plural rule or morpheme in English. Other examples are given below:

- a. The criterions are questionable.\*
- b. We must think of some other criterias.\*
- c. Many of your datas are questionable.\*

English language teachers in nonnative settings should take time to teach their plurality and concord. Some of the problematic ones are listed below:

Criterion-criteria, alumnus (male)-alumni, alumna (female)-alumnae, bacterium-bacteria, ovum-ova, erratum-errata, appendix-appendices, cherub-cherubim, seraph-seraphim, tempo-tempi, bourgeois-bourgeoisie, etc.

The proper teaching and understanding of English plural system, as classified above, will enable nonnative speakers to select the correct singular or plural as subject and consequently the correct verb.

In this formula, all nouns in Group 1, 2 and collective nouns in 3 and any noun that is plural, whether it has a plural -s morpheme or not, should be treated as S+s or N+s. Care ought to be taken by teachers to teach, explain and illustrate the two appearances of S+s/N+s, which has been explained. Subjects and nouns with physical +s are not problematic to foreign and second language learners. They can easily see and understand them. Unfortunately, however, their knowledge of the grammatical operations of the plural morpheme and its allomorph (-s, -es, -ies) is often overgeneralized and redeployed to words and contexts in which the plural marker is unnecessary or superfluous, particularly to mass nouns, e.g. jewelleryes, stationeries, equipments, personnels, clergies, etc as plurals. Therefore, a list of all or the major words that are mass nouns which are already inherently plural should be

listed and illustrated for L2 and FL learners of English (See Quirk et al 1972; 1985; Christopherson and Sandved 1969; Ekundayo 2009).

## The Nature of S-s/N-s

The next step in the application of this formula is the explanation of the nature of S-s or N-s. S-s means that the subject or noun is singular. Like S+s, S-s has two types of surface manifestations. There is S-s/N-s with zero 's' (no -s at all), a clear indication of singularity, as in these examples:

A boy...	}	S-s/N-s
That woman...		
The student...		
Our country...		

S-s/N-s words that come like plurals are the second type. In this second category are singular nouns with -s, -es and -ies spelling. Just as English has plural N+s/S+s which do not have a physical 's' (as shown earlier), there are also S-s/N-s singular words which carry a surface -s, -es and -ies, giving foreign learners the impression of plurality. In this class are some names of fields of study, diseases, time, space, monetary measurements and other fixed expressions having plural appearances. Although these words come with -s, -es and -ies, they are actually S-s/N-s because they are either practically singular or are by usage treated as singular; for example,

A		B
Field of Study		Infections
Maths/mathematics	}	shingles
Physics		measles
Stylistics		mumps
		scabies

S-s

The -s, -es and -ies in these words are not quite plural morphemes but orthographic.

The measles	is	all over the baby's skin
S-s	=	V+s
Stylistics	is	an interesting field of study.
S-s/N-s	=	V+s

The measles	are	all over the baby's skin *
Stylistics	are	an interesting field of study.
S-s/N-s	=	V-s

Even though the subjects all have +s, the 's' is treated as singular minus -s because it is there as part of the spelling and name of the field or disease, which denotes a singular thing or manifestation.

## Application of the Formula

This verbal concord formula can be used readily or quickly to correct errors of verbal concord. It has been applied by the researcher to teach verbal concord successfully in secondary and tertiary institutions with remarkable success since 1998 when it was formulated. Also, it facilitates the teaching of concord in all its types and senses: concord of grammatical number, proximity, correlative, notional and coordinated structures.

In proximity concord, for instance, the formula applies to the second part of the correlative expression, which is nearer to the verb:

(Not only the girls, but also)	the boy	is	in police custody.√
	S-s	=	V+s
(Either the teacher or)	his students	were informed.√	
	S+s	=	V-s
(Either the students or)	their teacher	was informed.√	
	S-s	=	V+s

Contrarily, in structures of quasi coordination, the formula applies to the farther part of the coordinated items: the first item mentioned in a quasi structure of coordination is used to harmonize the verb and subject agreement. Quasi coordinated structures use prepositions, prepositional phrases and adverbials (instead of the primary coordinators and, or and but) to coordinate two noun phrases (Quirk et al, 1985). Some examples are:

The pastor	(with his church members)	has left.
S-s	=	V+s
The church members	(with their pastor)	have left
S+s	=	V-s
Some students	(as well as a lecturer)	have confirmed it.
S+s	=	V-s

The villagers	(in addition to their king)	have been chased out.
S+s	=	V-s
The king	(in addition to the villagers)	has been chased out
S-s	=	V+s
The driver	(of the car (along with five passengers))	was rescued.
S+s	=	V-s
Five passengers	(along with the driver of the car)	were rescued.
S+	=	V-s
Our Vice Chancellor	(in company of his Deputies)	is here now.
S-s	=	V+s

For notional concord where the collective or mass noun that is the subject is sometimes treated as singular or plural, depending on the context and the meaning the user intends to convey, the formula can be applied either way:

Nigerian government	are	irresponsible and corrupt.
S+s	=	V-s

Here, the notion or idea that necessitates the use of government are...is the focus on officers, tiers and arms of government.

Nigerian government	is negotiating with	the so-called rebels.
S-s	=	V+s

In this second sentence with government is..., the focus of the user is on 'Nigerian government' as an entity, a unified whole.

The audience in the auditorium	was	a large one.
S-s	=	V+s

The audience in this context is seen as one group in the auditorium.

The audience in the auditorium	have split	into rowdy groups.
S+s	=	V-s

In this example, the audience are not united or behaving as a unified group any more. Focus is on the splits and individuals that form the audience.

### Exemptions to the Application of the Formula

There are very few exceptions that do not conform to this formula of verbal concord, as all formulas usually have their exceptions. In some expressions, the rule of S+s =V-s or S-s =V+s is violated at the surface structure.

### (i) The Pronoun I and You

An example is the grammatical rule that informs the use of a plural verb after the singular pronoun you and am after singular I: You are, you do, you have...not You is, you does, you has as singular, and I am, I do, I have; not I is, I does, I has, as singular. Following this formula, 'singular you ought to take 'is' and plural you plural ought to take 'are', as it correctly does:

You is looking beautiful.\*

S-s V+s

You are looking beautiful.

Native usage treat the second person pronoun you differently. It takes V-s (are, do, have, were, etc) for concord. There is no difference between you singular and you plural in native usage. The context of usage indicates which is plural or singular. Thus if we order someone: You come here now! 'you' here is singular. But if we order three men: You come here now! 'you' is plural in this context. To nonnative speakers, this may be confusing. Some new Englishes, like Nigerian English, have a grammatical way of marking plural 'you' from singular 'you'. Usually, educated Nigerians add an extra word, a noun or noun phrase to pluralize 'you':

You men should come here (plural).

You should come here (singular).

You students are mischievous (plural).

You are mischievous (singular) or

You are a mischievous student.

You people have to leave now (plural).

You have to leave now (singular).

(ii) Some fixed expressions violate this formula, as in the following examples:

a. As sure as eggs is eggs, not As sure as eggs are eggs.

As sure as eggs	is	eggs,	not	As sure as eggs	are	eggs.
S+s		V+s		S+s		V-s

b. Many 's the abortion she has done (√) instead of

Many 's	=	V+s
---------	---	-----

Many are the abortions she has done.\*

Many are		V-s
----------	--	-----

c. Till death do us part (√) instead of Till death does us part\*.

Till death	do	us part (√)	instead of	Till death	does	us part*
S-s		V-s		S-s		V+s

In present subjunctive expressions, the formula should not be applied too:

d. The panel recommended that the Vice Chancellor leave office immediately.

S-s=	V-s
------	-----

e. It was unanimously suggested that the Dean of Arts send a delegation there.

S-s	=	V-s
-----	---	-----

Sentences (a) to (c) are fixed expressions while (d) to (e) are grammatical usages. To say that 'the panel recommended that 'the VC leave office' is another way of saying 'the panel recommended that the VC should leave office'. We do not say 'should leaves office'. \*

### (iii) Time, Space and Measurement

Four years	}	S-s/N-s
Five million(s)		
Ten miles	}	S-s/N-s
Ten yards		
Five inches		

Where they are plurals, as in time and distance measurement in (iii) above, they have the sense of singularity and unbroken unity of time and the continuum of space such that they are treated as an entity, no matter how many or long they may be; for example:

Ten miles	is	a long distance.
S-s=	V+s	

Millions of dollars	has	been wasted on the project. ✓
S-s	=	V+s

Ten miles	are	a long distance. *
S-s	V-s	

Millions of pounds	have	been wasted on the project. *
S-s	V-s	

Five years	are	enough for him to understand and speak the language. *
S-s	V-s	

However, new Englishes are breaking these usages to conform with the regular rule and formula of verbal concord. Logically, the ones asterisked as wrong ought to be acceptable following grammatical verbal concord rule; for the nouns in the subject slot are indeed S+s/N+s. But the notion of oneness and continuum that these words

evoke inform their being treated as minus-s or as singular entities.

### ***Structural Patterns that Make Nonnative Speakers Break the Rule of Verbal Concord***

The teaching and learning of concord to foreigners and L2 users should be illustrated and rounded off with an examination of the contexts and English structures which often make L2 and FL users violate the rule of verbal concord. Most teachers of English as a second language often do not indicate and illustrate them. A number of contexts and grammatical structures militate against the correct grasp and use of verbal concord by nonnative speakers. Ekundayo (2009, pp. 87-91) has identified several factors that constrain nonnative speakers of English to violate concord rule in speaking and writing. They are depicted below in addition to some other factors:

#### *The Presence of a Word, Phrase or Clause between the Subject and Verb*

When a word, phrase or clause comes in between the verb and the subject, the speaker or writer may unconsciously forget the nature of the subject and use the wrong verb. Below are some examples from undergraduate composition scripts. The interruptive words or phrase are underlined and the real subjects are bold-faced.

- a. You who is talking doesn't know me. \*
- b. I that stayed in London doesn't speak like Londoners.\*

In sentence (a) who comes after You, the subject of the sentence. So, its presence influenced the choice of is and doesn't, which are wrong. If who is removed, the error will become clear: You... is talking... You doesn't... The correct construction should be "You who are talking don't know me." The same thing applies to sentence (b) where that stayed in London is an intervening clause. The sentence ought to read: I that stayed in London don't speak like Londoners, which is the expansion of the kernel sentence I don't speak like Londoners. Other examples are given below. The intervening structure is put in brackets:

- a. People (usually) laughs when somebody falls.\*
- b. She goes (there and) do some work.\*
- c. They sing (and) dances very well. \*
- d. I (who) is boasting) has nothing to give you.\*

When a phrase, clause or long group of words come after the subject, ignore it and make the verb tally with the subject in the beginning of the sentence.

*Inability to Recognize the Subject of a Sentence in Transposed/Inverted Constructions and Interrogative Sentences*

Sometimes, the common order of sentence construction is changed as in inversion, interrogative sentence and passive constructions. Nonnative speakers may have difficulty identifying the real subject in such patterns. The regular patterns are SV, SVC, SVA, SVO, SVOO, SVOC, SVOA and SVOCA. However, we can have the reverse such as VS, CVS, VSV, AVS, etc. In the second types, nonnative speakers may have difficulty identifying the real subject. So, they take the noun phrase at the initial position as the subject and use a corresponding verb, thereby breaking concord rule unintentionally, as in the examples below:

- a. In what ways are Mr Deni superior to them?\*(Mr Deni is the subject, not ways)
- b. How is your children?\*(Children is the subject, not how).
- c. What is the compound and house like\*(Compound and house are the subject).
- d. What and what are the man referring to?\*(The man is the subject)
- e. There is many mistakes in his project\*(Many mistakes is the subject, not there).

When foreign learners run into structures like these, the best thing to do to get the real subject is to change the order of the sentence to the regular type and then the subject will be seen in its right place:

- a. Mr Deni is superior to them in what ways?
- b. Your children are how?
- c. The man is referring to what and what?
- d. Many mistakes are there in his project.

Surely, one won't say your children is---or The man are...., or will one?

*The Presence of Two Main Verbs in a Sentence*

A writer/speaker may be tempted to pluralize two verbs in a sentence. When there are two finite verbs in the verb phrase of a sentence, concord

rule applies only to the first verb.

- a. What does the man wants?\*(What does the man want? ✓)
- b. Who does she thinks she is?\*(Who does she think she is? ✓)

*2.5.4 Mix-up of "Don't with "Doesn't" and Vice Versa*

Even when nonnative speakers understand how don't and doesn't are used theoretically, they still sometimes mix them up as a result of haste, distraction or not bearing the real subject of the sentence in mind, or when the subject compliment or verb object is plural:

- a. /My father/ have /many wives. \* My father has many wives. ✓
- S-s = V-s
- b. /Nigeria/ say /NO to war.\* Nigeria says NO to war. ✓

*Inconsistent Plural Rule for Collective Nouns*

Some collective nouns take plural verbs only, while some take both plural and singular, as noted earlier. But how do nonnative speakers know all and which is when they use the such mass nouns? They at times use the wrong verb after some collective nouns; for instance:

- a. The police is chasing him,\* instead of 'The police are chasing him'. ✓
- b. The clergy has kicked against OIC,\* instead of 'The clergy have kicked against OIC'. ✓
- c. Her undies is very neat.\* instead of 'Her undies are very neat'. ✓
- d. These informations are not correct.\* These pieces of information are not correct. ✓

*A Singular Subject Postmodified by a Plural Prepositional Phrase or Word*

- a. The gynaecologist said that the transmission of infections are easier during menstrual flow. \*

Here, the plural prepositional phrase ...of infections confused the speaker. But it is not the subject of the clause. The veritable subject of the clause is transmission that is postmodified by a plural prepositional phrase. So, the sentence should read 'The gynaecologist said that transmission of infections is easier during menstrual flow.

b. A list of one hundred names were sent to me\*.

List is the subject, not hundred names: 'A list of one hundred names was sent to me.'

c. This group (of words) are adverbial clause.\*

'Group' is the subject which should take 'is': 'This group of words is an adverbial clause'. ✓

*A Plural Subject Postmodified by a Singular Prepositional Phrase*

When a singular prepositional phrase postmodifies or qualifies a noun head, the singular prepositional phrase may wrongly influence the choice of verb, as in these examples. The prepositional phrases are put in brackets.

a. The indications (of his wicked attitude) is clear to me.

b. The indications of his wicked attitude are clear to me.

c. His arguments (about the effect of prostitution) is misleading.

d. (His arguments about the effect of prostitution are misleading). ✓

e. My father's response (to the issues) are not encouraging.\*

f. My father's response (to the issues) is not encouraging. ✓

g. Some features (of the girl) attracts me.\*

h. Some features (of the girl) attract me. ✓

In all these cases, the formula presented in this paper can correct the verbal concord errors once the real subjects and their grammatical nature are known.

*A Noun Phrase containing some singular words as pre- or postmodifiers*

When a subject is a noun phrase with plural modifiers or a combination of plural and singular, the concord may confuse nonnative users, as in these examples:

a. Many a man have been destroyed by her.\*      Many a man has been destroyed by her. ✓

b. A three-man committee are looking into the matter.\*

A three-man committee is looking into the matter

## Summary, Conclusion, Implication and Recommendation

This paper presents a theoretical and descriptive methodology and examines verbal concord in ESL and EFL against the backdrop of the concepts of interference and

intraference. The paper underscores the habit of overstretching English rules and features from one section where they acceptably function to another section where they are not used (intraference), which constrained educated Nigerians to produce concord errors and variation. Interference, which is well known in this field of study, also causes concord errors in ESL. These two linguistic habits make L2 users of English produce errors and variations, which consequently differentiate ESL from native (L1 or MT) English varieties. The paper shows that verbal concord errors are more common in nonnative English settings. Examples were drawn from educated Nigeria English as a Second Language (NESL).

It is recommended that learners and teachers of English in ESL and EFL settings stress the concepts of interference and intraference during the teaching of verbal concord and other structures. Verbal concord should be taught in the systematic and scientific way presented in this paper. To achieve the effective teaching, learning and use of verbal concord in ESL and EFL, formula  $N+s/S+s = V-s$  or  $N-s/S-s = V+s$  has been proposed and illustrated with graded steps and explanation in this paper. The three major steps of the method are the explanation and illustration of the formula, categorized detailed teaching and learning of plurality with illustrations of the structural dynamics of English that constrain nonnative speakers to produce verbal concord errors. This concord formula may be applied to teach verbal concord and correct concord errors in both formal and informal linguistic events in ESL and even native English settings.

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