
ERRORS IN USING AUXILIARY VERBS**Miroslava Tsvetkova**

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Abstract: A lot of learners of English have persisting problems in the correct use of verb tenses. This led to the study of the errors that Bulgarian learners of English make in their production. The article deals especially with the auxiliary verbs in English as one of the main types of verbs. Although they do not have their own meaning, the auxiliaries can perform different functions by expressing tense (providing time reference, i.e. past, present, or future), grammatical aspect (expressing the way a verb relates to the flow of time), modality (expressing necessity, permissibility and probability, and negations of these), voice (describing the relationship between the action expressed by the verb and the participant identified by the subject, object, etc.), or adding emphasis to the sentence. The study was based on traditional concepts of auxiliaries as being helpers of some sort, as opposed to the main verbs and focused on an analysis of learners’ errors. Since verbs are a particularly rich source of errors, it aimed to identify types and patterns of errors in the language learning process. In gathering the data, the researcher used a few tests and the procedures consisted of writing sentences or filling in the gaps, collecting and documenting the data, identifying, classifying, calculating the percentage of the data, and reporting the analysis. The corpus analysed was comprised of the learners’ examples.

The article attempts to answer the following questions: Why do learners limit the use of inversion to specific question words? What causes errors as the double marking of tense in English? Discussion of the errors and possible reasons for them given by other researchers in the field are also analysed.

Other problems that are discussed concern the identical forms of some auxiliary and main verbs (*be, do* and *have*). The article addresses the question of the syntactic functional (but not semantic) relations between the English auxiliaries and the verbal elements that follow them. If learners cannot distinguish them, they will make mistakes connected with inflexions, negative main verbs, the combination of auxiliary verbs, the order of auxiliary verbs, or word order. On the one hand, the errors support the idea that learners use the language productively, not just repeating what they hear. On the other hand, they intuitively use the type of linguistic category the way they use the main verbs *be, do* and *have* as regular, but never use the same forms for the auxiliaries *be, do* and *have*.

Having in mind that there are no auxiliary verbs in all the languages that can be easily mistaken with main verbs, the hypothesis that learners possess an innate mechanism that lets them distinguish the auxiliaries from the main verbs is less probable.

The author of the article concludes that there is no single analysis that covers all the auxiliaries. Each one needs to be examined on its own terms.

Keywords: auxiliary verb, main verb, error.

1. INTRODUCTION

Auxiliaries are one of the main types of verbs in English grammar. Although they do not have their own meaning, the auxiliaries can perform different functions by expressing tense (providing time reference, i.e. past, present, or future), grammatical aspect (expressing the way a verb relates to the flow of time), modality (expressing necessity, permissibility and probability, and negations of these), voice (describing the relationship between the action expressed by the verb and the participant identified by the subject, object, etc.), or adding emphasis to the sentence.

The study was based on traditional concepts of auxiliaries as being helpers of some sort, as opposed to the main verbs and focused on an analysis of learners’ errors. Since verbs are a particularly rich source of errors, it aimed to identify types and patterns of errors in the language learning process. In gathering the data, the researcher used a few tests and the procedures consisted of writing sentences or filling in the gaps, collecting and documenting the data, identifying, classifying, calculating the percentage of the data, and reporting the analysis. The corpus analysed was comprised of the learners’ examples.

2. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In fact, there are no pure auxiliary verbs in English. The auxiliary verb most often associates the subject with the predicate (*He is a doctor.*) and in this function, it is classified as a copula. It also appears as an element of passive voice (*He was seen.*), of progressive tense (*I am writing.*), and in some forms of perfect tense (*He has*

gone.). In addition to its auxiliary function in the perfect tense, the verb “have” can be a main (lexical) verb with the meaning of ‘possess’. Grammatically, *be*, *do* and *have* can generally be accepted both as auxiliary and lexical verbs.

The auxiliary verbs take an important part in the grammar of some languages, even in those with free word order. They may occupy first, second or final position in the sentences (Steele 1981). In English, the auxiliary verbs have an important role in the formation of questions:

General (yes/no) questions	<i>Are you coming?</i>
Special (wh-) questions	<i>Who do you like?</i>

Table 3. The position of the auxiliary verbs in questions.

Since the study is part of a larger project of the research group “Linguistic and cognitive aspects of young learners’ foreign language acquisition”, it attempts to answer how questions are developed in English second language acquisition as well as if there are some trace of first language.

The questions are: What is the reason that the learners do not use inversion in special questions? Why do learners limit the use of inversion to specific question words? What causes errors as the double marking of tense in English?

The study of the development of auxiliary verbs gives information about the acquisition of morphology and syntax. Early studies in the domain by Brown et al. (1969) and Brown (1968) stated that auxiliary emergence and inversion appear in yes/no questions before wh-questions. Moreover, inversion was found to be more productive in affirmative wh-questions compared to negative ones. According to Brown (1968), the reason for the inability to invert subject and verb is due learners being limited in their transformations used in utterances. The same authors claim that English learners know the rules for the use of the inversion subject-auxiliary verb and the initial position of the wh-word in questions, but they cannot apply both rules in one sentence. They believe that English language learners use inversion in general questions, but do not in special questions.

Using general questions learners start to invert the subject and the verbs but at the same time, the rate of incorrectly inverted verbs increases:

**Is your teddy bear have a name?*

**Does the sun is shining?*

**Is they like fish?*

**It is red?*

** Do you can open the door?*

**Is your T-shirt is dirty?*

In the case of special questions, there is no subject-verb inversion in early wh-questions. The examples show the lack of agreement between the subject and the auxiliary verb and overgeneralization of *be* is evident.

**Where you are?*

**Where is your friends?*

**What is they are?*

It is also observed that do-insertion is acquired after auxiliary inversion. In questions starting with *where* and *when*, the most common mistakes are either dropping of the auxiliary verb or putting it after the subject (not using inversion in questions):

**Where Lucy play?*

**When Lucy can come?*

Similar to Brown (1968), I also observed that, inversion is more productive in affirmative wh-questions compared to negative ones.

**Why you don’t have a textbook?*

**Why you don’t eat it?*

True responses using inversion are typical for combinations of question words and auxiliary verbs, which are often used in the input. The very structure of a special question is gradually acquired after producing a question using a pattern (*What’s that?*). In order to form a correct question, some additional knowledge is needed (Valian and Casey 2003). The fact that the question word stands at the beginning of the sentence is first to be learned. So errors

such as **Can Lucy find the ball where?* are very rare. Second, it must be assumed that tense is marked in each sentence and it is expressed either by the main verb or the auxiliary, but not by both of them:

**Where does Lucy plays?*

In the first case, the tense is not marked at all so the sentence is grammatically incorrect. In the second sentence, the tense is marked twice.

Third, learners must be aware of the equivalent group of elements (auxiliary verbs) that can be inverted with the subject. They consist of grammatical tense (present or past) and agreement (person, number), modal verbs (*can*, *will*), and *have* or *be* (as main or auxiliary verbs). All of them can be used simultaneously in a question (*Where might Lucy have been playing?*). If only tense and agreement are expressed by the main verb, a form of *do* is inserted to bring them (*Where does Lucy play?*). If there are two or more auxiliary verbs (*have been writing*), only the one that carries the tense and agreement i.e. the first auxiliary element is inverted.

From a linguistic point of view, what is common between these elements is that they are either created in the inflexion or moved there by the verb phrases. For example, tense and modal verbs originate from the inflexion while *have* and *be* come from the verb phrase. The inflectional elements take verbal complements on the observation that they are always followed by a VP. The form of the inflection depends on the properties of the subject. This phenomenon is known as agreement. When there are two inflectional elements, the sentence is ungrammatical. Therefore each of these elements belongs to the same category, but there is only one position for this category in each clause. The elements in the inflexion can be inverted with the subject in questions, the so-called inversion subject-auxiliary verb. So, what is common between the auxiliary verbs in English is the place they take in the inflexion. On the other hand, what distinguishes the special and general questions is that the move from the inflexion is obligatory in special but it is not in general questions.

As the inflection is a bound morpheme it needs supporting and in this case the auxiliaries are inserted directly into the inflectional slot. Which auxiliary is used, however, depends on the aspectual element heading the VP complement of the inflectional element. A perfective aspectual morpheme determines the supporting auxiliary to be *have* while the progressive morpheme determines the supporting auxiliary to be *be*.

In the case when two auxiliaries are inserted (*They have been staying*), *be*, determined by the progressive, is inserted onto the perfective morpheme which takes the phrase headed by *-ing* as its complement, and *have*, determined by the perfective, is inserted onto the tense morpheme (in this case null) which takes the phrase headed by the perfective morpheme as its complement.

The use of *have* and *be* as supporting auxiliaries is therefore associated with the appearance of the aspectual morphemes whose presence necessitates the use of the auxiliary by ‘tying-up’ the verb so that it cannot support any other morpheme. The use of the dummy auxiliary *do*, however, is a little different as it is not associated with the appearance of any aspectual morpheme.

Erreich et al. (1980) argue that all rules for moving a question word include two operations: copy and delete. They report the output of the double marking of the auxiliary verb. The aspects to be addressed concern:

- The long period of elimination of the double marking errors by the learners.
- The use of indirect negative evidence to enable English language learners to eliminate the double marking.
- The output of the double marking of the question word (**What did you see what?*).

Kuczaj and Maratsos (1983) explain the use of auxiliary verbs, which combines competence and speech production factors. In their view, English language learners gradually acquire the auxiliary verbs but at the beginning, they restrict their use to a specific context. They also restrict the use of the inversion subject-auxiliary verb to one or two question words at the beginning and later on generalize the rule for the other question words. They argue that learners acquire the auxiliary verbs in general questions, regardless of their use in communicative sentences, and gradually merge the auxiliary verbs into a syntactic category.

The same authors explain the double marking of tense through production. The double marking of a grammatical tense is limited to sentences in which a form of *do* is used as well as an irregular verb. They assume that learners just correct the wrong form of the irregular verb. This statement cannot be applied to the double marking of an auxiliary verb.

The paradox in learning syntax is that while English learners do not know what they have to learn, they will not be able to grasp the language grammar. Despite the existence of an innate mechanism that allows them to acquire the categories of words, this is not an explanation because the mechanism is not specifically linguistic (Stromswold 1994). The acquisition of auxiliary and main verbs can be used to determine if there is a specific linguistic mechanism that allows them to acquire a language. The acquisition of English auxiliary and main verbs is a good example for that because the two types of verbs are so semantically, syntactically and lexically similar to one another that one who has no knowledge of auxiliary and main verbs will certainly confuse them. For example,

instead of some auxiliary verbs, main verbs of very close meaning are used (pairs like *can / be able to*, *will / be going to*, *must / have to*). Auxiliary and main verbs are syntactically similar in that both types of verbs often accept verbal endings, follow the noun group/subject, and do not possess any of the grammatical properties of the noun, adjective, or other syntactic categories.

An important issue in linguistic theories is the ability of the auxiliary verbs to be main verbs. They usually have identical forms (*be*, *do* and *have*). The similarity is clearly evident in the following sentences:

He is sleepy / He is sleeping.

He does windows / He does not do windows.

He has cookies / He has eaten cookies.

There is a syntactic and functional relation between the auxiliary and the main verbs, especially in the cases of subordination and dependency, where three main positions can be observed. According to one of the positions, the auxiliary verbs are subordinate to or dependent on the main verb. This position is most clearly expressed by Huddleston (1984, 128): "Auxiliary verbs are precisely those verbs which do function as dependent in VP (verb phrase) structure and are contrasted with main verbs, which function as head". Similarly, Crystal (1980, 38) determines the subordinate status of auxiliary verbs as one of the two criteria for defining them. The second criterion is that the auxiliary verbs help to make the distinction in mood, aspect, voice, etc.

A similar view is expressed by Chomsky 1981; Felix 1990). The verb group, except for tense and modality, refers to the content structure and it is the main part of the finite simple sentence. In this case, the auxiliary verbs are not accepted as grammatical components. On the one hand, tense and modality are considered, and on the other hand, the rest of the auxiliary verbs, which can combine with the main verb in order to make a simple sentence. According to Anderson (1973, 82), the auxiliary verb in English is "a verb that comes in the course in its derivation to immediately govern another verb", and in some recent versions of the generative paradigm, the functional category of flexion contains properties such as tense and modality, as well as a complex agreement having of features of person, gender, and number. This category selects the verb phrase as its complement and the verb phrase can only be a complement to inflexion (Chomsky 1981; Felix 1990).

The second position is implied by Chomsky (1965) and his followers (Akmajian et al. 1979, 1-64), who consider the syntactic categories the auxiliary verb, verb, and verb phrase are on the same syntactic level, forming a coordinate structure of the concatenated constituents. According to Steele (1978, 15), one of the properties of the members of the category 'auxiliary verb' is that they do not subordinate the main verbs. She argues that the absence of an infinitive marker *to* in English after a modal verb indicates the absence of a clause boundary as well as the fact that the main verb is not subordinated to the modal one. This model is based on the structure of the phrase, not on the grammar of dependencies. Although using a dependency structure model, Hudson (1976, 149) concludes that the auxiliary verbs are at the same syntax level as the main verbs. In a sequence of verbs, each verb depends on the preceding one. Therefore, in the English sentence *John may have been swimming*, the first three verbs (*may*, *have*, *been*) are auxiliaries, while the last one (*swimming*) is not. Besides *may*, all auxiliaries depend on the previous one.

According to the third position, the main and auxiliary verbs are in the relation of dependent - head, function - argument, operator-operand, or controlled - controller (Anderson 1973, 82; Schachter 1983).

If learners cannot distinguish them, they will make mistakes connected with inflexions (**I aming go*. **I musts eat*), negative main verbs (**I eat not cookies*), combination of auxiliary verbs (**I may should go*), order of auxiliary verbs (**He have must gone*. **I go must*), or use of inversion with the main verb (**Eats he meat?*). On the one hand, the errors support the idea that learners use the language productively, not just repeating what they hear. On the other hand, they intuitively use the type of linguistic category the way they use the main verbs *be*, *do* and *have* as regular, but never use the same forms for the auxiliaries *be*, *do* and *have*.

Children learn languages quickly, but as Pinker (1989) points out, they still make some types of mistakes. They use the inflexions for the regular verbs and plural, saying **eated* instead of *ate*, or **mouses* instead of *mice* (Pinker 1989). They make lexical mistakes, too, as sometimes using verbs like *die* in passive voice (**He get died*). Syntax errors are also possible by using do-support when it is not required (**Does it be around it?* **This doesn't be straight*) (Stromswold 1990, 1992), but miss it when it is necessary (**What she eats*). What do these mistakes testify? On the one hand, they confirm the hypothesis that the learners use the language productively and not just simply repeat what they hear. On the other hand, they are intuitive about the type of linguistic categories they are predisposed to learn. For example, children use the main verbs *be*, *do*, and *have* as regular verbs, but never use the same forms for the auxiliary verbs *be*, *do* and *have* (Stromswold 1992). The fact that children make sentences like **She beed happy*, but not sentences such as **She beed smiling* shows that children can distinguish the auxiliaries from the main verbs as well as they use the two types of verbs differently.

What kind of innate mechanism can influence the children to apply a rule only for main verbs, but not for their homonymous auxiliary verbs?

One of the possibilities is that children have an innate learning mechanism, which makes them use the auxiliary verbs in a different way from the main verbs. But this is not an explanation of the problem. Although many languages contain words that are semantically and syntactically similar to the auxiliary verbs in English (Steele 1981) and all languages can make semantic and syntactic differences, which in English are made by the auxiliary verbs, in some languages (Bulgarian, for example) there are no auxiliary verbs (instead, flexions are used) or no distinction is made between the auxiliary and main verbs. Thus first language transfer is not the reason. Given that not all languages possess auxiliary verbs that can easily be misinterpreted with the main verbs, it is unlikely that there exists an innate mechanism that allows the children to distinguish between the two types of verbs. In addition, the hypotheses for specific innate mechanisms are not justified, because they do not explain anything more than the phenomena that lead us to suppose their existence.

On the other hand, the learners' ability to distinguish between auxiliary and main verbs may have an impact on the more general ability to distinguish between the functional categories (auxiliary verbs, noun and verb endings, pronouns, etc.) as well as lexical categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.).

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Auxiliaries belong unambiguously to what is generally referred to as a functional category, rather than a lexical category. The nature of functional categories is that they are generally taken to not be predicative categories, but rather feature carriers.

The results from the study show that the earliest production on both general and special questions indicates that the learners neither comprehend the early questions exactly, nor can they produce question where the auxiliary verb is inverted. The only questions that are used correctly at the beginning are those which follow a pattern.

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