

The Study of “S” As a Verbal Agreement Marker in Modern English Grammar

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Abstract

The present article is devoted to the study of “S” in modern English grammar. It examines the behavior of this operator in the English language. Thus, the study shows that this marker plays a very important role in the functioning of this English language. Its origin and status have created a lot of debates around the linguistic and grammar fields. Though there have been some studies on its history, many speculations on its origin have been based on inferences from synchronic variation. In addition, focusing on its function and position towards the verb or the noun we have pointed out “S” can be used as verbal agreement marker or as noun agreement marker. In so doing, the role it plays, as a verbal marker is totally different from the one it plays as noun marker. But this current study is focused on its status as a verbal agreement marker.

Keywords: grammar, marker, noun, operator, verb.

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INTRODUCTION

The grammatical properties of “S” marker have aroused a lot of research among scholars. The operator “S” is generally considered a descendant of Old English “*þ*” which marked present indicative in third person singular and all persons in plural. Its use for all persons and numbers was apparently a dialectal feature of Northern English [1]. Thus, this morpheme belongs to the operators in English language that one tends to take for granted, and often, it has attracted the attention of grammarians who have had to explain the use and functions of such marker in English language to speakers of another language in which the system is different.

However, the semantics of this operator is connected with concepts that are fundamental to English grammar. The fact that this grammatical morpheme is regarded as belonging to different domains of grammar makes it difficult to find terms that are generally applicable on it. In addition, the origin of this marker has brought about some problems of misunderstanding among researchers. “Is it a verbal or aspectual or plural marker?” is also a question which is often raised in the linguistic world. Some people would also regard it as a marker of the genitive case. So, several analyses have been done by grammarians and

linguists regarding the nature of this grammatical marker.

But whatever these works may be, some research can still be done in this field. For a lot of speakers or researchers or students or learners of English still face difficulties related to the origin, the nature, the status and the function of this grammatical operator. That is why this article has been written in order to shed light on this misunderstanding and to contribute to the understanding of this marker. However, the main point of this study will be focused on “s” as a present tense marker.

The concept of tense in grammar is a category that expresses time reference referring to the moment of speaking. Tense is usually manifested by the use of specific forms of verbs, particularly in their conjugation patterns. It is a linguistic concept which denotes the form taken by the verb to locate the situation referred to in time to express the temporal relation between the time of the situation in question and an orientation. The present tense is used when the speaker or writer expresses a situation which has relation with the moment of speaking. (s)He can be validating the relation at the moment of speaking or giving his/her

point of view or talking about the result of an action or making an assessment of a situation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework on which this study will be based is the theory of the functionalism. In the linguistic field, there are several schools (one of which the Prague School) which have suggested many definitions of the functionalism. Thus, the functionalism can be defined as a theory that can refer to any one of various approaches to the study of grammatical descriptions and processes that consider the purposes to which language is put and the contexts in which language occurs.

According to Christopher S. Butler [2], Bates & Mac Whinney [3] discern at least four levels of functionalism, ranging from a relatively conservative historical view to some radical proposals about the nature of adult grammatical knowledge. Each level requires qualitatively different kinds of evidence, although the stronger levels presuppose the more conservative ones both logically and empirically. The four respective positions involve (1) claims about diachronic or historical correlations between form and function, (2) synchronic or ongoing correlations between form and function in real-time processing, (3) use of these form-function correlations in the acquisition of language by children, and finally (4) a functionalist approach to the grammar or system of representation that mediates the relationship between form and function.

Butler keeps stating that a functionalist approach, however, given the emphasis on language as communication, must be centrally concerned with the relationship between linguistic patterning and contexts of use. Some functionalists are willing to recognize that there is a distinction to be made between knowledge of rules and regularities, on the one hand, and the use to which this knowledge is put, on the other. But even for such linguists, the linguistic knowledge involved goes far beyond knowledge of the syntactic, semantic, morphological and phonological rules, to include knowledge of how these rules can be appropriately used in particular types of context.

Thus, as it is often said, the starting point for functionalists is the view that language is first and foremost an instrument for communication between human beings, and that this fact is central in explaining why languages are as they are. This orientation certainly corresponds to the layperson's view of what language is.

LITERARY REVIEW

The study of "S" marker in English language has been the object of several studies in the linguistic and grammarian fields. Poplack [4] states that the vigorous variations in "s" usage throughout the history

of English coupled with the dearth of parallel phenomena in modern White usage would suggest that the variability has by now resolved itself in contemporary White English in favor of the standard prescriptive variant.

According to Jespersen [1], Modern English "s" is generally considered a descendant of Old English "þ" which marked present indicative in third person singular and all persons in plural. Its use for all persons and numbers was apparently a dialectical feature of Northern English. Though, some historians do not totally agree on the exact origin of verbal "s", whether it arose through sound change from "þ" or through analogical extension or on the reasons for its replacement of "þ" or because it was more easily articulated. But, as Poplack keeps on saying, one of the chief characteristics of the transition between Old English and Middle English verbal forms is the gradual loss of many of the older verbal endings.

As for Curme [5], the original second person singular verbal ending "s" spread first to second person plural, then to other persons of the plural and finally to third person singular, so that in the Old English period, "s" was variably used in the North for all persons and numbers. By Middle English, it appeared throughout the paradigm and at that time it spread geographically to the Midlands, where it coexisted with "þ" in third person singular and occurred variably in the plural [4]. Later, the "s" inflection became established in London and in the South more generally, first affecting only the spoken language, and subsequently penetrating written styles.

Hughes and Trudgill [6] observe that in a number of nonstandard British dialects, the present tense verbal paradigm is completely regular as a result of the absence third person singular "s". In addition, Jespersen [1] argues that competing marking patterns in the indicative present- tense paradigm were regional variants. In fact, the verbal "s" inflection has been considered one of the safest criteria in determining the dialectal origin of a Middle English text. It is also said that in Standard English, the present tense is not inflected morphologically, except on verbs with third person singular subjects and these categories receive the affix "s", traditionally referred to as the verbal agreement or number concord marker.

According to Schneider, there are two stages in the development of the Vernacular Black English "s" inflection. In the first stage, Black American slaves acquired the nonstandard inflectional system of their white linguistic models, characterized by variable but predominant use of "s" in all persons. In the second stage, the growing influence of standardization led to a progressive decline of "s", but this proceeded differentially according to region. In addition, he keeps saying that at an early stage, and possibly now, "s" had

the grammatical function of marking present tense. Its occurrence was variable but not irregular and stemmed from the mixture of contrasting marking patterns in the English dialects to which the early slaves exposed [7].

According to Labov *et al.* [8] the verbal “s” has no grammatical function in Vernacular Black English and is inserted irregularly in “odd, unpredictable and idiosyncratic positions”. The “s” variability was not generally affected by style shifting, especially among younger speakers and its deletion was not subject to the regular phonological conditioning found in studies of deletion of other final consonants.

As for Brewer [9], the “s” marker is an aspectual feature that marks durative aspect and not the result of “unstable acquisition” of Standard American English present tense marking. In addition, some Black speakers consider this operator as a verbal agreement marker of the third singular person subject in favorable social context. Still, Schneider seems not to agree with them for, according to him, the “s” marker is neither a post Creole importation from Standard English in the third person, or a case of hypercorrection in other persons, but simply a continuation of the tendency prevalent throughout the history of English.

HYPOTHESES AND OBJECTIVES

The present work is articulated in the study of “s” marker. This latter can be a verbal agreement marker, or a plural marker or an operator of the genitive case. But as far as this work is concerned, we will base it on the former status of this operator.

So, this article aims at bringing out the formal structures of grammar and more specifically of “s” as a verbal agreement marker in English language. For a better understanding of the questionings, it will be necessary to point out the objective of the study. It intends to enlighten the use, the nature and the origin of this operator. In addition, through this work, we would like to shed light on all the problems, misunderstanding and confusion made by students or learners in the perception they have on this marker or the analysis they do on it. Furthermore, this article will help

understanding the very status of “s” as a verbal agreement marker. However, the study of this operator as a simple present tense marker shall be in the score of the analysis.

METHODOLOGY

To gather information in order to write this paper and answer to all the questions about this English marker, a lot of research has been made in some libraries, books and net sources. As a linguistic topic, this part of the project aims at indicating the ways we have undertaken in order to make a good research project. However, to make a good work and finish it in the right time we have done some research. For literary documentation we have:

- Read some books and theses related to English grammar.
- Afterwards, for data collecting, gone and seen some native speakers.
- Gone to some libraries such as the University library, the library of the English Department, the library of CLAD (Centre de Linguistique Appliquée de Dakar) meaning (Dakar Center for Applied Linguistics)
- Gone to WARC (West African Research Center), to IFAN (Institut fondamental d’Afrique Noire), SIL (Société Internationale de Linguistique).
- Done some research to the Internet to have some definitions and explanations of some concepts.

This research has allowed us to have a lot of information and to elaborate our corpus. After the elaboration of the corpus, we have moved on to data analysis and we have ended up in the following results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Before going deeper to the analysis of these results and discussions, we would like, through the following chart, to show the pronunciation of the “s” marker as it is used with verbs which end with both voiced and voiceless consonants.

/ɪz/	/s/	/z/
If the verb ends with sounds such as /s/, /z/, /sh/, /ch/, /dz/...	If the verb ends with a voiceless consonant sound; such as /p/, /t/, /f/, /k/...	If the verb ends with voiced consonants such as; /b/, /v/, /g/, /z/, /m/...or vowels
Passes, judges, reaches...	puts, stops, laughs...	Loves, robs, begs, comes...

The chart above shows that there are different kinds of pronunciations of this verbal agreement maker. When a verb ends with /s/, /z/ etc, as it can be seen in the first column of the chart, “e” is added before the “s” marker. In this case, there will be “es” which is pronounced /ɪz/. The second column of the chart shows that the operator “s” is pronounced /s/ after a voiceless sound. Unlike this second column, in the third one, the

verbal agreement marker “s” is pronounced /z/ if the verb (to which it is suffixed) ends with a voiced or a vowel sound. Nevertheless, however different these pronunciations may be, this grammatical operator has the same function toward the tense. It marks the simple present tense.

The present tense, according to Bybee *et al.* [10], carries no explicit meaning at all; it refers to the default situation from which other tenses represent deviations. Because of its neutral semantics, they argue that the present tense can absorb the meaning inherent to normal social and physical phenomena, and this meaning if described and broken down explicitly, consists of habitual occurrence and behavior as well as ongoing states. As a state selector, it can impose stative readings on any dynamic verb with which it combines, thereby resolving semantic conflict between the verb and the inflection that is attached to it.

Cooper [11] states that the English Present is “exotic” in requiring a higher degree of coincidence between speech time and situation time than does present-tense inflection in other languages: “the semantic location of the present in other languages requires the discourse time to temporally overlap the event time rather than be identical with it”. However, what does “s” express in the present tense? Let’s take into account the following examples.

- *It's a human sign, when things go wrong, when the scent of her lingers and temptation's strong, into the boundary, of each married man, sweet deceit comes calling*

In this sentence, Elton John uses the simple present to introduce the action as a reality. She validates the predicative relationship at the moment of singing. This use indicates that the singer places his point of view at the present moment and she shows that what is presented by the verb or auxiliary (Be) is real at the moment of speaking.

- *Our objective is African union now. There is no time to waste* [12]

In this example, Nkrumah uses the simple present (in the first sentence) to validate the relationship between the grammatical subject (*our objective*) and the predicate (*African union now*). Besides, in this first sentence, the validation of the predicative relation becomes more useful. This time, not only does Nkrumah ratify their objective but he also strengthens it through the use of the adverb “now”. What he wants is African unity. In other words, his objective is to have all African States united. He keeps on stating that “African unity is, above all, a political kingdom which can only be gained by political means”.

In the second sentence, the use of the simple present goes along with the operator “no” which invalidates the predicate relation. This means that the author insists on the very time of the unity. For him, African States must be independent and united there and then. The following sentence even shows it.

- *Independence is only the prelude to a new and more involved struggle for the right to conduct our own economic and social affair to construct our society according to our*

aspirations, unhampered by crushing and humiliating neo-colonialist controls and interference.

In this sentence, not only is Nkrumah recommending the independence and the unity of Africa, but he also regards this independence as the beginning of an involved struggle. Moreover, the use of the adverb “only” indicates that he is convicted in his opinion. So, the use of the simple present in this sentence shows that he purposefully objectivizes the realization of the predicative relation that he is validating. He regards it as a reality, as a truth.

In English, the simple present is a tense which shows that the meaningful content corresponding to the predicate is checked by the enunciator. This latter just validates the relationship between the subject and the predicate. They present what they say as a truth that is independent from any particular point of view. It is what Bouscaren often calls “referral to the notion” in so far as there is a little determination on the predicative relation. Nevertheless, the validation of this predicative relation, which is presented as an event, can be expressed through two different values according to the context: the generic value and the specific value.

The Generic value

The generic value of the simple present can be defined as an observation of fact which is general. It can, therefore, be a fact or event that is valid in any situation. In other words, it can be a property of the grammatical subject. It is in this case that it is said that the simple present is used to express “general truth”, “permanent action” or “habitual action” etc.

- *The sun rises in the East.*
- *Oil floats on water*

In these sentences, the simple present, which is expressed by the operator “s”, is used to express general truth. The enunciator shows the characteristics, the property of the grammatical subject *the sun* (in the first sentence) and *Oil* (in the second), which is regarded as the departure point of the predicative relation. They validate the relationship between the grammatical subject and the predicate at the moment of speaking. In other words, they regard the relation as a truth, a reality. But the enunciator cannot intervene in these general or scientific truths for they exist out of him/her. In other words, these truths do not depend on him/her. Besides, they are objectively regarded as verifiable by the one who uses them.

Furthermore, the enunciator does not intervene on the relation between the subject and the predicate for the property which is expressed by the predicate does not depend on him/her, but on the grammatical subject. The predicate is an intrinsic property of the subject that the enunciator is just enouncing without commenting. They do nothing but place side by side the subject and

the predicate. Meanwhile, through the use of this tense, the enunciator can express some permanent actions as the following examples illustrate it.

- *He goes to Fatick every summer.*
- *Elizabethan plays rugby on Saturdays*

The enunciator presents the action as permanent. It is about a habit, a repetitive action. There is neither a rooting in a given situation nor a referral to a unique process. The only thing, stated here, is the characteristic of the grammatical subject. Thus, we can add that the events which are described here through the use of the simple present are not about a specific observation from the enunciator, in a precise situation. The enunciator does behave like an explicit observer of the event. They just show the event without any explicit point of view. In addition, they use the simple present, marked by “s”, to show that they consider what they say to be true or real at the moment of speaking, let it be exact or not in the absolute.

Thus, we have pointed out that this marker has not only a semantic and temporal value but it also shows a remarkable property of the grammatical subject. Independently of the historical origin of this operator, it is necessary to emphasize its importance on the structural level. Indeed, this “s” marker reveals that the verb is invested of a property which belongs to the grammatical subject. The enunciator states that there is a relation between the grammatical subject and the predicate. They give to the listener some indications which are temporal and they situate the wording towards the time of speaking. In addition, we can say that there is a close and direct link between the subject and the lexical verb but the main focus is on the subject. However, the main focus can, not be on the subject as the following chapter shows it.

The Specific Value

We talk about specific value of the simple present when it (simple present) conserves its nominal determination value at the enunciator’s time of speaking and that the main focus is on the predicate. In other words, in the specific value of the present, the enunciator does not assign a property to the (grammatical) subject. They just point out an event and the observation is that it is about a particular situation.

- *John goes into the kitchen and fixes another round.*
- *Sadio shoots, the goal keeper diverts the ball*

These examples show the specific value of the simple present. The enunciator, focusing on what (s)he can see, is describing the movements of the grammatical subject. They do not comment on the situation. They just describe the action, as they can see it, at the moment of speaking. Thus, we can even say that the action is happening at the moment of speaking.

So, the simple present is used to express a particular situation. It can also be used to express something else as the following examples illustrate it.

- *Moussa leaves tomorrow*
- *Moussa arrives soon*

The enunciator resorts to the simple present to express a particular situation. It expresses a near future. The value of the referral to the future is shown by the adverb “tomorrow”. The enunciator gives a piece of information without being particularly involved. So, the main focus of these wordings is on the fact of leaving tomorrow (for the first sentence) and arriving soon (for the second one). In other words, what is stressed in these examples is the predicates and not the grammatical subject.

- *Moustapha Niass declares the parliament sessions open.*
- *Sokhna bets him ten dollars.*

In these examples, the enunciator turns to the performative use. The action happens at the moment of speaking. The grammatical subjects (*Moustapha Niass and Sokhna*) realize the predicates (*declares the parliament sessions open and bets him ten dollars*) when the enunciator utters the wordings. There is a validation of the predicate relationship without any particular point of view of the enunciator. Nonetheless, the value of the performatives causes some interpretations.

CONCLUSION

The study of “S” as a verbal agreement marker has shown that this operator plays a very important role in English grammar. It (“S”) can be used to mark the present tense. This latter can be viewed as an aspectually sensitive tense operator that selects for the class of states. Thus, through this study, we have noticed that, In English, the simple present is a tense which shows that the meaningful content corresponding to the predicate is checked by the enunciator. (S) he (enunciator) just validates the relationship between the subject and the predicate. They present what they say as a truth that is independent from any particular point of view.

Furthermore, the study has shown that the enunciator can resort to this “S”, marking the present tense, to state that there is a relation between the grammatical subject and the predicate. They give to the listener some indications which are temporal and they situate the wording towards the time of speaking. In addition, we can say that there is a close and direct link between the subject and the lexical verb but the main focus is on the subject. However, the main focus can, not be on the subject but on the predicate as it has been demonstrated on the second part of the results and discussions. The present tense has also functions

beyond that of reporting situations ongoing at speech time as it is often stated.

We have also noticed that the ability of the present tense to combine with event verbs need not be viewed as evidence of its lack of semantic restrictions. Such combinatory freedom can instead be viewed as evidence of the aspectual sensitivity of the English present tense and its consequent ability to shift the aspectual type of verbs with which it combines. Moreover, we have pointed out that this operator has not only a semantic and temporal value but it also shows a remarkable property of the grammatical subject. Independently of its historical origin, it is necessary to emphasize its importance on the structural and morphological levels, mainly when it is used as a plural agreement marker.

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