PRINCIPALE OF PROXIMITY AS USED BY IRAQI EFL LEARNERS

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1. Introduction

Much work has been done on concord. However, insufficient attention has been made to the Principle of Proximity which simply can be defined as the agreement of the verb with whatever noun or pronoun closely precedes it, sometimes in preference to agreement with the headword of the subject. Hence, this work will deal with this principle showing its importance and uses. It may tackles the problems Iraqi EFL students may face while dealing with this principle. It is hypothesized that Iraqi EFL learners tend to use grammatical concord rather than the Principle of Proximity where it ought to be used.

To achieve this aim, definitions on "concord" will be presented with its main principles, then, the Principle of Proximity will be tackled. The most important findings will be revealed after the practical part represented by a test submitted to forth year students – College of Education for Human Sciences – University of Babylon.

2. Concord

Concord is the agreement between two grammatical items in number, person, gender, and case. Quirk et al (1985:755) define it as *"the relationship between tow grammatical units such that one of them displays a particular feature (e.g. plurality) that accords with a displayed (or semantically implicit) feature in the other."*

Crystal (1997:79) agrees with Quirk et al on the definition of concord since he defines it as *"a term used in grammatical theory and description to refer to a formal relationship between elements, whereby a form of one word requires a corresponding form of another"*.

The most important type of concord in English is concord of 3rd person number between subject and verb. Thus, Quirk et al (1985:757) and Biber et al (2000:180-90) agree in that there are three types of concord express subject-verb agreement. It is "*The rule that the verb matches its subject in number may be called the principle of **grammatical concord**".* (ibid)

(1) My daughter watches television after supper. (singular subject +singular verb).

(2) My daughters watch television after supper. (plural subject +plural verb).

According to Leech and Svartvik (1994: 260) grammatical concord means that "*certain grammatical items agree with each other*"; that is:

She knows, but they know.

Quirk et al (1985:757) believe that the difficulties over concord arise through occasional conflict between grammatical concord and the two other principles: principle of **notional concord** and the **principle of proximity.**

Notional concord is "*agreement of verb with subject according to the notion of number rather than with the actual presence of grammatical marker for that notion*", (ibid).

(3) The <u>public</u> <u>are</u> getting tired of those demonstrations.

(Leech and Svartvik, 1994: 261)

In such sentence, when the subject is a group noun (e.g., public, people, government, audience , team,…..etc) , the choice of the singular or plural verb depends on whether the group is being considered as a singular undivided body or as a collection of individuals. Thus, in (3), the choice of the verb <u>are</u> is determined according to the idea of plural in the group noun <u>public</u> rather than the actual singular form of the noun. It is also possible to treat the word <u>public</u> as singular:-

(4) The <u>public</u> <u>is</u> getting tired of those demonstrations.

(ibid)

3. Principle of Proximity

Biber et al (2000:189) mention that the regular pattern of grammatical concord may be disturbed by proximity, i.e., "*the tendency for the verb to agree with a noun which is closer to the verb (typically in a post modifier) but which is not the head of the subject noun phrase.*"

Greenbaum and Quirk (1990: 215) define the principle of proximity similarly, since "it denotes agreement of the verb with whether noun or pronoun closely precedes it, sometimes in preference to agreement with the headword of the subject":

(5) One in <u>ten</u> <u>take</u> drugs.

The preceding plural noun <u>ten</u> has influenced the choice of the plural verb <u>take</u>, although the subject <u>One in ten</u> is grammatically singular because the headword <u>one</u> is singular.

Quirk et al (1985:757) state that "*the principle of proximity denotes agreement of the verb with a closely preceding noun phrase in preference to agreement with the head of the noun phrase that functions as subject*":

(6) A large number of <u>people</u> <u>have</u> asked me to stand for reelection.

(7) A variety of analytic <u>methods</u> <u>have</u> been used.

(Leech and Svartvik, 1994: 262)

The grammatical heads of the noun phrase (<u>number</u> and <u>variety</u>) are both singular, and one would expect the verb <u>has</u>. But the plural noun (<u>people</u> and <u>methods</u>) in the **of-phrase** modifying the head influences the form of the near by verb. This feature is called **attraction** or **proximity** because the last noun attracts a certain form in the verb and upsets the rule of grammatical concord. In the two above example, attraction works together with notional concord since the head nouns convey the idea of 'plural'.

3.1 Cases of Proximity

Quirk et al (1985:757) believe that the conflict between grammatical concord and attraction through proximity tends to increase with the distance between the noun phrase head of the subject and the verb, especially when the post modifier is lengthy or when adverbial or a parenthesis intervenes between the subject and the verb. Therefore, there are certain cases in which proximity concord is workable:-

3.1.1 Proximity Concord with Indefinite Expressions as Subject

Leech and Svartivk (1994:263) explain that the indefinite expressions of amount, especially any, no, and none often cause concord problems. Quirk et al (1985: 764) state that the prescriptive grammar have tended to insist on the singular form of verb. Thus, principle of proximity is rejected and considered to be informal:

(8) None of the boys is here. (formal English).

(9) None of the boys are here. (informal English).

<div align="right">(Abdullah, 2005:35)</div>

Quirk et al (1985:764) mention that according to the principle of proximity, plural concord is used with indefinites like each, every, everybody, anybody, nobody, everyone, and anyone:

(10) ?Nobody, not even the teachers were listening.

Although such sentence occurs in casual speech or in advertently written down, most people consider it as ungrammatical because if flatly contradicts grammatical concord (ibid).

Notional concord with concord of proximity in that plural verb is used, informally, when either or particularly neither is followed by prepositional phrase with plural complement:

(11) Either ⌐
            of them are welcome. (informal)
  Neither ⌐

<div align="right">(ibid)</div>

(12) I sent cards to Avis and Margery but neither of them have replied. (informal)

(13) In fact, I doubt if either of them are coming. (informal)

<div align="right">(Leech and Svartvik, 1994:263)</div>

3.1.2 Proximity Concord with Important Nouns

Chalker (1984:97) shows that when the subject is a noun phrase (not a simple noun), the verb should agree with the head. But if the head is felt to be unimportant, the verb may agree with another noun, particularly if this noun is closer:

(14) A number of pupils have chosen this new course.   (ibid)

3.1.3 Proximity Concord with Subject followed by as well as Plus noun phrase

Biber et al (2000:180) express that the complication of concord is typically raised when the number of subject is doubtful, either because it is not clearly marked or because the number of the subject noun phrase is

variable. Some pronouns combine with singular or plural verb form (e.g., the wh-words). Thus, using principle of proximity provides the solution.

Principle of proximity plays a role where the subject is followed by (as well as+ noun phrase):

(15) An old man <u>as well as several women</u> <u>were</u> at home.

(ibid: 190)

3.1.4 Proximity Concord with Coordinated Subject

a- Quasi – coordination

Quirk et al (1985:761) express that sometimes the principle of notional concord combined with the proximity principle especially in loosely expressed speech as in:

(16) [?]One man with his wife, both looking very anxious , <u>were</u> pleading with a guard to let them through.

(17) [?]The President, together with his advisors, <u>are</u> preparing a statement on the crisis. (ibid)

However, in cases of inversion or of an adverbial quasi-subject, a singular form of verb is used according to principle of proximity:

(18) [?]Where's the scissors?

(19) [?] Here's John and Mary. (ibid: 765)

The singular verb follows by attraction because what precedes the subject here is not marked for plural. Thus, it is possible to generalize the rule of concord to 'a subject which is not clearly semantically plural requires a singular verb'; especially with pseudo-subject <u>there</u> a singular verb follows by attraction:

(20) <u>There's</u> hundreds of people on the waiting list. (informal speech)

(ibid: 756)

b- Coordination with <u>or</u> and <u>nor</u>

When two noun phrases are joined by <u>or</u> , <u>nor</u> , <u>either…or</u> , <u>neither…nor</u> , <u>not…but</u> , <u>not only…but also</u>, the grammatical concord and notional concord provide no guidance if the two noun phrases (i.e. subjects) differ in number and person. That means the problem arises with these kinds of coordination when one noun phrase is singular and the other is plural. Thus, the number of last subject determines the form of the verb (i.e. principle of proximity):

(21) a- Either the <u>workers</u> or the <u>director</u> <u>is</u> to be blame for disruption.

(22) b- Either the <u>director</u> or the <u>workers</u> <u>are</u> to be blame for disruption.

(Leech and Svartvik, 1994:262)

(23) a- Neither <u>my brother</u> nor <u>my sister</u> <u>is</u> red-haired.

(24) b- Neither <u>my brother</u> nor <u>my sisters</u> <u>are</u> red-haired.

(Alexander, 1988: 105)

(25) Not the butter but the maids <u>clean</u> the house.

(George, 2004: 3)

(26) The <u>books</u> or the <u>pen</u> <u>is</u> in the drawer.

(Joe, 2002: 5)

3.1.5 Proximity Concord with Species Nouns

It has been explained be Biber et al. (2000:190) that principle of proximity , which sometimes operates with notional concord, may reinforce the use of plural concord with quantifying expressions containing **of** plus noun phrase. Such expressions are <u>kind of</u> , <u>form of</u>, <u>type of</u>.:

(27) <u>All kind of people</u> <u>were</u> waiting for buses or just standing around.
(28) It remains to be seen what precise <u>form of words</u> <u>are</u> agreed by the 12 heads of government.

<p align="right">(ibid)</p>

They (ibid) justify the use of proximity here by saying that it is more acceptable in such cases than the grammatical concord though these expressions are considered determiners in some other respects.

3.2. Misleading Cases of Proximity Concord

There are certain cases which resemble the proximity concord, but they are not:

3.2.1 Concord with Coordinated Subjects

Sometimes, the choice of singular or plural depends on how one looks at these qualities in the subject , whether they are seen as separate issues or as a single , complex issue:

(30) a- <u>Low and order</u> <u>is</u> considered important in the election.

<p align="right">[single, complex issue]</p>

(31) b- <u>Low and order</u> <u>are</u> considered important in the election.

<p align="right">[separate issues]</p>
<p align="right">(Leech and Svartvik,1994: 262)</p>

3.2.2 Concord with Two Noun Phrases Referring to the Same Thing (or Person).

A singular verb is used when the conjoined noun phrases refer to the same person or thing as follows:

(32) At the party <u>my colleague and long-time friend</u>, Charles Bedford, <u>was</u> the guest of honor.

<p align="right">(ibid)</p>

Also, Bell (2001: 2) agrees with Leech and Svartvik saying that when the compound subjects are trying to convey a singular idea, the verb is singular:

(33) <u>The athletic trainer and graduate student</u> <u>is</u> Bill Smith.

<p align="right">(ibid)</p>

4. The practical analysis

Table (1) : Results of learners' response in using the principle of proximity

No. of items	Correct answer	Percentage	Wrong answer	Percentage	Total
1	6	10%	54	90%	100%
2	34	56.67%	26	43.33%	100%
3	33	55%	27	45%	100%
4	21	35%	39	65%	100%
5	9	15%	51	85%	100%

Table (1) reveals the results of learners' response to the items representing their performance in using the principle of proximity. Concerning the first item in the table , though it is simple , the students misuse this principle.

It is expected that the majority of the students fit the right answer in the second and the third items since they are mentioned in the text books but the fact is that about half of the sample answer the items correctly.

The forth item here is answered correctly by 21 students while the majority miss answer it . And 51 out of 60 students whose represents is 85% percentage answer the last item wrongly. This shows that they depend on jessing because the structure of this item is similar to that in the third and forth ones.

Table (2): Analysis of the answers of question 2.

Table (2): Results of Learners performance in using the principle of grammatical concord rather than the principle of proximity

No. of items	Right answers (both cases)	Percentage	Grammar concord	Percentage	Principle of proximity	Percentage	Wrong answer	Percentage	Total
1	5	8.3%	25	41.7%	26	43.33%	4	6.67	100%
2	2	3.3%	40	66.7	14	23.33%	4	6.67	100%
3	4	6.67	31	51.66%	25	41.67%	0	0 %	100%
4	0	0%	20	33.33%	24	40%	16	26.67%	100%
5	1	1.7%	11	18.3%	48	80%	0	0%	100%

Only about 3-5 students out of 60 could answer the items correctly. The item is already in their text books. Though high percentage could choose the principle of proximity , their choices depend on jessing since they depend on what they hear not on what they know or study.

5. Conclusion

After applying the test to the forth year students, since they study this topic , in the department of English , College of Education for Human Sciences – University of Babylon, it is concluded that:

The principle of proximity occurs mainly in unplanned discourse. Mostly in writing , it may be corrected to grammatical concord.
The principle of proximity has been combined, in many cases, with the notional concord, and mostly it has been rejected by grammatical concord. In any way, the importance of the principle of proximity is that; it is workable is cases where the two principles (grammatical and notional) provide no guidance.
Concerning the first hypothesis , the students have been proved that they misuse the principle of proximity. So the face problem concerning this respect.

As far as the second hypothesis that reveals students will tend the grammatical concord rather then the principle of proximity, it has been shown that the average of their use to both concords was similar. But their choice to one of them was randomly selected. This reveals that they face problem with grammatical concord also. They depend basically on jessing and on what they used to hear even if it was wrong.

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