
Non-standard features in English in Anglophone Cameroon New Writing: dilemmas for the education system

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Grammar and punctuation in prescribed highschool literature raise difficult issues for Cameroon educators

Introduction

One of the ways a language is learned, especially a foreign language, is by personal extensive reading. When people read widely, they are exposed to the linguistic structure of what they read and so learn it consciously or unconsciously. What they come across in their reading remains in their minds and adds to their general knowledge. This includes knowledge of the language they read. General wide reading reinforces the language students have been formally taught in their language classes. Exposure to grammatically correct language would improve their language skills. On the other hand, exposure to incorrect language would negatively affect the language skills of foreign learners and cause them to use wrong language comfortably, not knowing that they are erroneous in their usage.

The printed word is powerful, and many people, especially young learners, believe that what is printed is necessarily correct. Hence the novels available in our markets for the entertainment of our population through personal extensive reading, and the books selected to use for the teaching of literature in secondary schools, have great influence on the language production of the readers. Standard British English is taught in Cameroon schools. The question to ask is whether new Anglophone Cameroon writings, and especially those selected for the teaching of literature, are up to the standard of English expected of young Cameroonians.

Broughton et al (1980: 110) have this to say:

The practice of extensive reading needs little justification. It is clearly the easiest way of bringing the foreign learner into contact with a substantial body of English. If he reads, and what he reads is of some interest to him, then the language of what he has read rings in his head, the patterns of collocation and idiom are established almost painlessly with a range



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Table 1: Types of Grammatical Errors in *Manka'a*

Example sentence	Page	Type of Error	Suggested Correction
...for Manka'a was not good enough to harvest that which she had nursed, sown and tended to.	2	Two mutually exclusive relative pronouns juxtaposed instead of one nominal relative pronoun	Manka'a was not good enough to harvest what she had nursed, ...
Convincing the Palm Board about his discovery was not easy. Made up of people who were used to the old system, it was difficult to put through the present day technology.	5	Dangling modifier	Since the Board was made up of people who were used to the old system, it was difficult to put through to them the present day technology.
Being brilliant in her school her father had worked hard on his farms, harvesting palm nuts and producing palm oil to sell in order to see her through her education.	15	Dangling modifier	Because she was brilliant at school, her father had worked hard on his farms, ...
People said she will become a big woman someday ...	18	Tense inconsistency	People said she would ...
...and his wife had learnt the husband's dialect so well that a stranger to the family will find it difficult to believe that she was not of the tribe.	23	Tense inconsistency	...would ...
The success of the program had replaced many hectares with the new hybrid species.	5	Lack of an animate subject	Because of the success of the program, the new hybrid species had been planted on many hectares, replacing the old crop.
He has been returning to the house each day to be taken care of by Manka'a; a girl, he realized, who was not only beautiful and soft spoken but accomplished in all household chores.	12	Omission of 'also' between 'but' and 'accomplished'	...who was not only beautiful and soft spoken but also accomplished in all household chores.
Sanitation was divided into two main groups: Cleaning around the compounds and repairing latrines, cleaning the paths to the farms and the maternity compound.	51	Omission of co-ordinating conjunction 'and'	Cleaning around the compounds and repairing latrines and cleaning the paths to the farms and the maternity compound.
Fortunately, the number of such girls was very negligible to those who knew what they wanted and fought hard to get it.	43	Omission of comparative word	...negligible compared to ...
For now she should be counted out of the election and the first candidate to stand .	48	Use of infinitive instead of modal auxiliary	...should stand ...

(Continued)

Table 1: Continued

Example sentence	Page	Type of Error	Suggested Correction
'It is the Lord God that made us to be what we are today. ...'	25	Unnecessary insertion of 'to be'	It is the Lord God who made us what we are today.
... 'The Founder Father' of this our association, ...	42	Mutually exclusive determiners	The Founding Father of this association (or our association)
Children brought up in righteousness can only breed good .	44	verb + adjective instead of Verb + noun	... breed goodness ...
The hospital had ran smoothly	117	Incorrect past participle of verbs	... had run ...

and intensity which is impossible in terms of oral classroom treatment of the language, where the constraints of lock-step teaching and multiple repetitions, however necessary they may be, impose severe restrictions on the sheer volume of the amount of language with which pupils come into contact.

Edna P. DeHaven (1979: 465) points to even further benefits of reading:

Library books offer many possibilities for expanding vocabulary and other skills and appreciations. ... Wide reading improves children's thinking and conceptualization and helps them develop a general awareness of the relationship and structure of ideas. Quality books acquaint children with good expository and creative writing and help them develop a cognitive framework for self-expression.

Are Anglophone Cameroon new writings books of quality? Can they help children develop their creative writing as well as enhance or improve on their grammar, spelling and punctuation? In evaluating material that should be used for school teaching or that should be placed on the syllabus for Cameroonian schools, the powers that be should consider whether 'the material is compatible with knowledge of the children's language development, and provides for continuous and well-rounded growth in using and enjoying language' (DeHaven, 1979: 467).

To carry out this study, two novels used for literature in Forms 2 and 3 respectively in some secondary schools in Anglophone Cameroon have been selected. They are Ngwa J. Neba's *Manka'a* (2002), and Kemonde Wangmonde's *A Challenge to Young Girls* (2002). Data collected from these novels are cited and discussed below. I will deal with only three categories of errors in this study:

grammar, punctuation and spelling inconsistencies. Furthermore to avoid repetition only two mistakes per category will be exemplified and the total number given in brackets. The model used for the study is basic error analysis. Although this may seem an unduly prescriptive approach, it is an appropriate one in the context of works set for formal study, which are expected to provide suitable language models for students.

Novel 1: *Manka'a*

Grammar/Sentence Structure

The grammar errors found in *Manka'a* are of various types. The first type to be identified has to do with relative pronouns – *who*, *which*, *that*, *whom*, *whose* – which introduce relative clauses in complex sentences. Relative pronouns are mutually exclusive and relative clauses function as post-modifiers of nouns. However, there is another set of relative pronouns – *who*, *whom*, *which*, *whoever*, *whomever*, *whichever*, *what*, *whatever* – that introduce nominal relative clauses. Nominal relative clauses function as noun phrases so they can be subjects and direct objects of sentences (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002: 104 & 128). In the text under study, there is an instance where two mutually exclusive relative pronouns are juxtaposed in the same clause, instead of using a single nominal relative pronoun ($n = 1$). The example phrase is ...*to harvest that which she had nursed*, rather than the plainer 'to harvest what she had nursed'. This may have been a hypercorrection on the part of the author or copy-editor trying to avoid what happens in non-standard constructions like *the man what I saw*.

The second type of error discovered is that of dangling modifiers. A dangling modifier has no

Table 2: Types of Punctuation Errors in *Manka'a*

Example sentence	Page	Type of Error	Suggested Correction
Her once smooth and full cheeks were showing some paleness. But why not given what she had to do?	2	Omission of comma	...why not, given what...
He immediately realized that though built of wooden boards, the club was well looked after with clean chairs and various water-colour pictures of the crops grown in the area.	6	Omission of comma	...that, though... ..after, with...
Her shapely legs were barely covered by the threadbare dress she had on; a dress she had mended so often and could merely succeed to keep it clean without destroying the delicate fibers.	1	Use of semi-colon instead of hyphen.	...she had on – a dress she had mended so often and could merely succeed to keep clean, without destroying its delicate fibers.
He has been returning to the house each day to be taken care of by Manka'a; a girl, he realized, who was not only beautiful and soft spoken but accomplished in all household chores.	12	Use of semi-colon instead of hyphen.	...Manka'a – a girl ...
'What,' asked the man in her bed; he who was far from being Mr. Right.	87	Wrong use of semi-colon + no question mark	'What?' asked the man in her bed, he who was far from ...
However, I feel it is time you knew a few places, so we will find them out , I have learnt there are some touristic sites in town.	11	Comma splice	...find them out. I have learned...
Ngwe was restless, She could imagine the joy and happiness surrounding the marriage of Muma and Manka'a.	77	Comma splice	Ngwe was restless; she could...
'No, not now, thank you. ' He answered.	9	Faulty direct speech punctuation	'No, not now, thank you,' he said.
'Oh! No. Don't get me wrong.' He said.	11	Faulty direct speech punctuation	'...wrong,' he said.
Every congregation member came to listen to, what was termed by all, 'the angelic voices'.	31	Unnecessary commas.	
Her stupid arguments and open hatred of a very intelligent and well behaved Manka'a, had frightened young men from her.	76	Unnecessary commas	
The preparation of the traditional meal being handed down the line by the most natural teacher: experience.	60	Sentence fragment	The preparation of the traditional meal had been handed down ...
Now I am able to help my junior one's in primary school.	12	Wrong use of apostrophe.	...junior ones in primary school

Table 3: Some tense errors in *A Challenge to Young Girls*

Example sentence	Page	Suggested correction
... Mboh said curtly and moved into the kitchen[,] hoping Yaah will go away because the girl was the last person she wanted in their compound.	6	... would ...
Mboh saw Yaah as a source of inconvenience to her because her father will always be comparing her with the inspector's daughter.	8	... would ...
She thought mournfully of her neatly ironed dress and a costly pair of shoes her mother bought for her, all locked up in her father's cupboard. All the plans she had for the day were ruined and what vexed her most was the dance she missed at P.Y.C. where she had been given a special invitation by one of the organizers. It was going to be her last Christmas celebration in primary school and she'd planned to enjoy herself to the fullest with her friends.	21–22	... had bought; had had; had been ruined; was going to miss; ...
The Christmas went sour for Mboh when her father returned from Yaounde where he was attending a seminar.	22	... had been attending ...

subject of its own, and its implied subject cannot be identified with the subject of the sentence though it can usually be identified with some other phrase in the sentence (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002: 158–9). Absolute clauses are non-finite or verbless adverbial clauses which have their own subjects. If adverbial clauses have no subject of their own, their implied subject is generally the same as the subject of the sentence; if this is not the case, then there is an instance of dangling. In *Manka'a*, there are occasional dangling modifiers (n=2), which do impact upon the readability of the text (see table 1).

Tense inconsistency is the third category of errors found in the text we are examining. Time references are not always considered during conjugation of verbs. While one should not be unduly prescriptive in assessing English as a second or foreign language, the occurrence of basic errors is not acceptable in a set work used for the teaching of literature in schools and for improving students' English. This is one of the most common errors in the text (n=5).

Other isolated errors occur throughout the novel (n=9), as can be seen in table 1. Boldface is used to indicate the part of the sentence where an error occurs.

Punctuation

As far as punctuation is concerned, the greatest weakness manifested in *Manka'a* is the absence of obligatory commas in sentences (n=70).

Non-restrictive clauses should be separated from the rest of the sentence with a comma or a pair of commas, as the case may be. Adverbial clauses are punctuated with commas, as well as vocatives and interjections (Connor, 1990: 61–3). These punctuation rules are not always observed in the text. Then there is the use of commas where another major punctuation mark is needed, thereby creating comma splices (n=4). In addition, some sentence fragments and a few run-on sentences do exist in the text. Lastly, rules for punctuating direct speech are also not always followed (n=8). For example, in the case of a final reporting clause, if the direct speech sentence would ordinarily end in a full stop, one puts a comma before the quotation marks, and the first letter for the reporting clause is in lower case (except if it is a proper noun). This rule has not been observed all the time in *Manka'a*. Table 2 below contains examples of wrong punctuation, again limited to two examples per category. Where two consecutive words appear in bold, a comma is missing between them. I have given a corrected version of the first few only, as examples. Again, where the symbol ≈ appears on the third column of the table, the error type has been repeated.

Spelling inconsistency

In *Manka'a*, the word 'program' is spelled on page 5 using the American orthographic system. One would think that the author has decided to use that system throughout his work. However, on the following page he uses the British spelling

Table 4: A selection of other grammatical errors in *A Challenge to Young Girls*

Error	Page	Type	Suggested correction
*The tyres of the Toyota screeched a heart rending sound on the road skidding off the road to the right and left before coming to a halt a few metres from where Mboh laid wriggling.	41	Wrong verb	... a few metres from where Mboh lay wriggling.
She was directed to a specialist in a village, there she found herself consulting the aunt of the lady she maltreated in her hospital.	64	Comma splice	... village. There, she found ... she had maltreated ...
Yaah wanted to be a good doctor, she knew what that will mean to her patients.	104	Comma splice	... good doctor. She knew what that would ...
This book is dedicated to all my pupils, past and present from which I draw the inspiration and courage to tackle my literacy works.	1	Wrong relative pronoun choice.	... Whom ...
With her father, it was a different story. She, her brothers and sisters knew when it was not convenient for any of them to expose his or her childishness, this was when their father was at ...	22	Wrong pronoun choice	... Their ...
Mr. Mayingefeh was the first of the two class seven teachers to arrive the class.	13	Problem with phrasal verb	... arrive at ...
She had been doing that whenever there was roll call in the morning and on certain days she would leave the house and never arrive the center.	41	Problem with phrasal verb	... arrive at ...
She worked so hard that after the G.C.E. was written she fell sick and was admitted in the hospital for two weeks.	62	Wrong preposition	... admitted to ...
She dreamt that she was admitted in a university in Pretoria, capital of South Africa.	74	Wrong preposition	... admitted to ...
Mr. Menyingefeh understood his agony and felt sympathetic for him.	24	Wrong collocation (adj. for noun)	... felt sympathy for him ...
When they play those their tricks on foolish girls, they easily succeed.	35	Mutually exclusive determiners	... those ...
"I am going to study medicine at the Glasgow University," she answered wishing the woman would stop talking to her in that her rapid way.	83	Mutually exclusive determiners	... her rapid way ...
Yaah sensed trouble and moved away. She knew Mboh was in a bad state and could start fighting her. God Forbid! A thing she had never done before. It was obvious to Yaah that for some strange reasons, Mboh did not like her and why should she hate me ? She thought as she walked to their house. She had not been long in Victoria and wondered what she must have done to Mboh to incur her hatred.	7	Shift in person	... her ...

(Continued)

Table 4: Continued

Error	Page	Type	Suggested correction
She too could have been like Yaah if she didn't lost her way in life.	102	Wrong auxiliary verb	... hadn't lost ...
The doctor who attended to her was a German volunteer serving with the Abarkwa Regional Hospital. She drew a lot of inspiration from a young lady, Dr. Otto as she was called.	62	Indefinite article for definite	...the young lady...
A girl standing next to Mboh vomited twice and was looking so weak.	68	inappropriate adverb <i>so</i>	... very ...
She must have taken after her mother except that she was a talkative while her mother spoke very little.	73	Unnecessary article	...her mother was talkative.../ her mother was a talkative person ...
She put down her head and remained quietly like that .	93	No comparison present	...in that position ...
Some of them are victims of circumstance .	100	Sg. for pl.	... circumstances ...

Table 5: Punctuation errors in *A Challenge to Young Girls*

Example sentence	Page	Error type	Suggested correction
"That is a very progressive way of looking at life my daughter."	28	Vocative not separated	...life, my daughter ...
You make me laugh my brother I don't know why God gave me such dull children.	78	Vocative and run-on sentence	...laugh, my brother. I don't know. ...
Some parents are never at home, this gives the children the freedom to do whatever they want.	40	Comma splice	...at home. This gives. ...
The driver of the vehicle saw the danger and stamped his foot on the brakes while working skillfully on the steering. The tyres of the Toyota screeched a heart rending sound on the road skidding off the road to the right and left before coming to a halt a few metres from where Mboh [lay] wriggling.	41	Adverbial clauses not punctuated	...the brakes, whilethe road, skidding off ...
"I know policemen have no manners," Neh said to her husband jokingly as she cleared the table.	52	Adverbial not separated	...husband, jokingly, as ...
Others had done it and why not herself.	50	2 parallel clauses involving comparison need a comma	Others had done it, and why not herself?
For her parents it was a thing to celebrate.	50	Verbless clause not separated	For her parents, it was ...

(Continued)

Table 5: Continued

Example sentence	Page	Error type	Suggested correction
“My leg is not the problem at the moment.” She sobbed.	45	Wrong direct speech punctuation	...moment,” she sobbed
Some die-hards who do not want to give up their indiscriminate love affairs call AIDS an American ploy to discourage sex or cut down world population particularly that of Africa.	60	Non-restrictive appositive not separated	...world population, particularly that of Africa.
The two doctors, Dr. Ndemah and Dr. Yaah Ndemah now husband and wife finally returned home after working for two years at a clinic in Glasgow after Dr. Yaah Ndemah’s graduation as a doctor from the Glasgow University.	94	Incomplete punctuation of non-restrictive apposition + adverbial not separated	...husband and wife, finally returned... In Glasgow, after Dr. Yaah...
She was the only student from Victoria in that college, and had to make new friends though she was careful about the kind of friends she made.	52	Misplaced comma	...in that college and had to make new friends, though she ...
AIDS she said had no cure unlike other sexually transmitted diseases like gonorrhoea and syphilis which were easily treated.	53	Medial reporting statement not separated	AIDS, she said, had no cure...
But there is something you must realize a woman without a man is like a house without a roof or a tree without branches.	65	Run-on sentence	...you must realize: A woman...
“The rate at which you read, nothing can be above you,” Ngieh, her cousin stated .	80	Incomplete punctuation	...Ngieh, her cousin, stated.
Some of them drop out of school and remain semi-illiterates for life while others become mothers with a chain of children they cannot take good care of.	102	Missing comma before a coordinator of two long main clauses	...semi-illiterates for life, while others...

system to spell the word ‘colour’, and on page 9 ‘parlour’. This can be very confusing to young secondary school students, if the education system insists on consistency between American and British norms.

Novel 2: A Challenge to Young Girls

Errors of grammar

Of the grammar errors found in *A Challenge to Young Girls*, verb tense inconsistency and failure

to express time relationships accurately top the list (n=41). Table 3 illustrates a few of these. Other less frequent types are given in table 4 (totaling another 23 examples). Again the number of examples per category are limited to no more than two.

Punctuation

Punctuation errors similar to those in *Manka’a* are found in *A Challenge for Young Girls*. There are many obligatory commas missing. Other examples

Table 6: Possible typographical errors in *A Challenge to Young Girls*

Example sentence	Page	Suggested correction
“Mboh, I that the way you behave or don’t you want me to talk to you?”	7	“Mboh, is that the way...?”
“I beg, is don’t have time to talk to people and it is none of your business ...”	7	“I beg, I don’t have time...”
“The day I will see a woman with a bucket of faece on her head then I will accept that what a man can do a woman can also do.”	51	“...faeces...”
At the head of the Institution, was Sister Margaret Mary, an educationists and ...	54	...of the Institution was Sister Margaret, an educationist and...
Are you sick? The woman asked very concerned.	56	“Are you sick?” the woman asked, concerned.
“I am as blank in the subject as you are? I hear there are dream books ...	76	“...as you are. I hear...”
“Safeh, you are urgently wanted in the secretariat Come .”	89	“...the secretariat. Come.”
“...The man was working in Ghana at the time but now they are working in Cameroon?” Yaah replied.		“...in Cameroon,” Yaah replied.

show overuse of the comma, when it is not required at all, or when some other punctuation mark would have been more appropriate. Table 5 gives a sample of such errors (which totalled 35 in all). For reasons of space only one example per category of error is listed.

Some of the punctuation and spelling errors in *A Challenge to Young Girls* are simply typographical and point to the need for better proof-reading by publisher and author. Table 6 gives a list of these errors, indicated again in bold.

Conclusion

‘Cameroon English’ is a variety of English that is nationally and internationally recognised, by *inter alia* a publisher like Mouton de Gruyter in their *Handbook of Varieties of English* (2004, reprinted in part as Mesthrie, 2008). In *Manka’a*, there are indeed examples of Cameroon English usage as far as vocabulary is concerned. For example, on page 13, Mr. Ayuk tells Manka’a: ‘You are like my **last follower**’, meaning ‘youngest junior sister’ or ‘youngest sibling’. On page 11 of *A Challenge for Young Girls*, Yaah says, ‘... Why should somebody be angry because I am brilliant? ... This is **wonderful** O.’ Her mother replies, ‘This is our **wonderful** world, my daughter.’ *Wonderful* is used here as a common ‘Cameroonism’ to mean ‘terrible’ (in the Standard British English

sense). Such local idioms and occasional turns of grammar can be valuable in adding a local flavour to a text, especially in conversation within a novel. But this does not apply to the kinds of grammar and spelling referred to in tables 1 to 5.

First, the question to be asked is whether basic grammar and punctuation rules of Standard English can be waived in Cameroon national literature. I am of the opinion that this should not be the case, since this standard is taught (or is supposed to be taught) in schools throughout the country. Emerging writers need to pay attention to the conventions of standard English in their work, especially in writings which aspire to be used for the teaching of literature in schools. On the other hand, if the rules are to be ignored, then students should *not* be penalised during the marking of their scripts, be it during class tests, promotion examinations, or official examinations like the General Certificate of Education (GCE) examination. This hardly seems possible. Secondly, I am questioning whether literature teachers call their students’ attention to these errors and correct them during lessons, or simply ignore them. It is not entirely clear whether the teachers themselves are aware of these errors.

Cameroonian publishers appear to have difficulties with the editing process. They need to get good editors – specialists in the field – and pay

them well enough to do their work efficiently. Writers themselves should also assure adequate proof-reading of their works before sending them to publishing houses. Finally, how books are selected to be placed on the official list of books authorised for school use in Cameroon is questionable. What are the criteria for book selection? Do those who select the books actually read through them first to find out their suitability for the various subjects and grades of students they are to be used for? Young Cameroonians deserve better quality than what is being offered to them at present in terms of books for literary studies.

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