

Grammatical Exclusivity in English Communication Situations; the Case of Adjective “Only” Misplaced as Adverb

L’Exclusivité grammaticale dans les situations de communication en anglais

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Abstract

There is a strong connection between syntactic structures and the meanings they generate in the English language. A word’s syntactic environment determines its grammatical and communicative name and function. Therefore, the word “only” can be an adjective or an adverb, depending on what word it is placed near. The current survey investigated the extent and frequency of misplacement of what is meant to be a focusing exclusive adjective “only” in sentences as an adverb and its communicative consequences. A total of 51 instances of such misplacement were obtained through accidental sampling. Syntactic-semantic analyses of 20 of them are presented. Also, the ability of 200 English speakers to identify the errors of misplacement and their semantic disruption was tested. The findings show that the misplacement defies racial boundaries and, strangely, results in no communication breakdown.

Keywords: Adjectives, Adverbs, grammatical infelicity, semantics, linguistic variables

Resumé

Il existe un lien étroit entre les structures syntaxiques et les significations qu'elles génèrent dans la langue anglaise. L'environnement syntaxique d'un mot détermine son nom et sa fonction grammaticale et communicative. Par conséquent, le mot "only" peut être un adjectif ou un adverbe, selon le mot près duquel il est placé. Cette étude a examiné sur l'étendue et la fréquence du mauvais placement de ce qui est censé être un adjectif exclusif focalisant "uniquement" dans les phrases en tant qu'adverbe et ses conséquences communicatives. Un total de 51 cas de tels égarements ont été obtenus par échantillonnage accidentel. Des analyses syntaxiques-sémantiques de 20 d'entre eux sont présentées. Aussi, la capacité de 200 anglophones à identifier les erreurs de mauvais placement et leur perturbation sémantique a été testée. Les résultats montrent que le déplacement défie les frontières raciales et, étrangement, n'entraîne aucune rupture de communication.

Mots clés : Adjectifs, Adverbes, infélicité grammaticale, sémantique, variables linguistiques

Grammaticality, Meaningfulness and Communicative Functions

Grammar, used interchangeably with Syntax, describes a system of rules that guides arrangement of words to form acceptable units like phrases, clauses and sentences. It primarily ensures correctness of word order which can be achieved without achieving meaningfulness. An example of correct arrangement without any clear meaning is "The tasteless wine tastes sweet". This ordering or arrangement of this stretch of words does not violate any grammatical rule: Its identifiable subject (The tasteless wine), verb (tastes) and adjunct (sweet) are well arranged but it is still arrant nonsense when viewed from the standpoint of semantics which is essential to communication, the primary essence of language.

On the other hand, an ungrammatical structure may convey an unmistakable meaning. For example, "Many boys has wrote their name" and "I going Lagos" are terribly grammatically infelicitous but still meaningful. The sentences are better written grammatically as "Many boys have written their names" and "I am going to Lagos" respectively. It is, therefore, clear that poor grammar may not render a stretch of words meaningless and good grammar does not necessarily ensure communication flow. This is why there are schools of thoughts that de-emphasise grammar instructions.

There is, however, a strong connection between semantic representations and syntactic ones (Marcheggiani & Titov, 2017). Benavides-Varela and Gervain (2017) emphasise the importance of the grammatical functions of relative order of words in sentences. If gross grammatical infelicities occur too many times in a conversation, meaning may be completely lost or misunderstood.

The order of word classes in a normal English sentence is represented with the acronym SPCOA in which S = Subject; P = Predicator (or V = Verb); C = Complement; O = Object; A = Adjunct/Adverbial. A sentence may not

necessarily contain all the elements. However, the ones that are present in a sentence are normally arranged in that order for grammatical correctness. This does not mean there may not be some exceptions to this rule because language also has some elements of dynamism as a living phenomenon. Examples of sentences with the normal grammatical order words are:

The student sweeded the farm completely
S P/V O A

The girl runs fast.
S P/V A

The current study is about how the wrong placement of what is meant to be an adjective can make it function as a type of adverb and thereby alter the intended meaning of the sentence in which word misplacement occurs. This can be a source of accidental misinformation. Therefore, it is pertinent to describe adjectives and adverbs at this juncture.

Adjectives pre-qualify or post-qualify nouns as shown below:

The young man is going to London (The adjective “young” pre-qualifies the noun “man”).

The man going to London is young (The adjective “young” post-qualifies the noun “man”).

The above examples show that adjectives are fairly mobile in English sentences. An overgeneralisation of this grammatical fact may account for the tendency to carelessly misplace an adjective.

Adverbs are described as words that modify verbs, other adverbs, adjectives, and clauses (Gorjian & Moradi, 2019). When they modify other adverbs or adjectives, they are referred to as intensifiers. This is because when so used, they strengthen the imports of the classes of words they modify.

Mr Smith works hard (the adverb “hard” modifies the verb “work”).

Mr Smith works extremely hard (The adverb “extremely” modifies/intensifies the adverb “hard”).

Mr Smith is very handsome (The adverb “very” modifies/intensifies the adjective “handsome”).

Unfortunately, he missed the way (The adverb modifies the clause “he missed the way”).

Of all the parts of speech that are used to construct sentences in English, adverbs are known to be the most versatile or mobile (Larsson, Callies, Hasselgård, Laso, Van Vuuren, Verdaguer & Paquot, 2020). Vann (2019) identifies the focus adverbs as “only”, “even” and “also”. They can function correctly in the beginning, middle or at the end of a sentence as demonstrated in the following sentences:

Stealthily, the serial murderer followed his victims.

The serial murderer stealthily followed his victims.

The serial murderer followed stealthily his victims.

The serial murderer followed his victims stealthily.

Vann (2019) identifies the focus adverbs as “only”, “even” and “also”.

It has been demonstrated that adjectives are fairly mobile. Adverbs are the most mobile of all parts of speech. If there is any word that can function as an adjective in some contexts and as an adverb in others, special caution should be exercised when placing such a word in any sentence so that it may not be inadvertently made to function differently from what is intended. An example is the word “only” which can intensify a noun in some contexts and thus be an adjective or modify a verb or another adverb, thus be and adverb.

This study is about the misplacement of “only” which can make it function as a focusing exclusive adverb where it is meant to be an adjective focusing a noun exclusively. Vann (2019) describes the focus adverbs (“only”, “even” and “also”) as a special sub-category of modifiers, the appropriate placement of which depends on some other linguistic variables as semantics and prosody. Specifically, the study will concentrate on the word “only”, an intensifier that can function as an adjective but may be inadvertently converted into a focus adverb, with particular attention on its placement in sentences, scrutinizing its effect on the semantic imports in selected sentences.

It is noteworthy that, in consonance with the stipulation of the systemic grammar tradition that a word derives its grammatical name from the function it performs in a sentence, “only” can be identified as either an adjective or as an adverb. If it modifies a noun, it is an adjective but if it modifies a verb, it is an adverb as demonstrated in the following examples:

Only men are allowed in the shrine (Adjective modifying the noun “men”).

They only waved goodbye without giving him any gift (Adverb modifying the verb “waved”).

Appropriate placement of “only” is the concern of this study. Therefore, all examples henceforth will emphasise this alone. This is because its placement is crucial to making meaning with exactitude (Vann, 2019). The placement of “only” will determine whether it is being used as an adjective or an adverb.

Andrushenko (2021:.1) labels “only” as “a focusing exclusive adverb” and this has a great implication for the current study. The adverb “only” makes whatever verb, adverb or clause it modifies exclusive, showing that no alternative to such verb, adjective, adverb or clause is obtainable in the context of the sentence. This means any misuse of the adverb could falsely portray what it is wrongly placed near as exclusive. For example, “I only told him the truth” means “I did nothing other than tell him the truth. I did not offer him any advice concerning the truth. I did not listen to his reaction to the truth. I did nothing else”. The focus exclusive adverb “only” modifies the verb “told” as absolutely the only thing done. The meaning could have been different by

shifting “only” nearer to a noun. Then, it could have been rightly described as a focusing exclusive adjective as in “I told him the truth only”.

What further necessitates this current study is the fact that in a lot of spoken and written discourses, quite a number of instances of misplacement of this focusing exclusive can be spotted. Surprisingly, native speakers of the English language, too, can be found misplacing it in speech and in writing. This means many times, people say and write things with somehow different meaning or emphasis from their intended messages.

Three of the factors that could be responsible for the faulty placement of grammatical element in a second language learners are insufficient knowledge of the target language, over generalisation of learned grammar rules, or possibly issues in the performance during language production (Vann, 2019). One of the findings from a study by Benavides-Varela and Gervain (2017) shows that children demonstrate natural ability to master different word order from infancy. However, since native speakers of the English language also misplace “only”, some other cause(s) of such misplacement would have to be investigated.

Zimmermann (2017) has observed that syntactic changes can be manifestations of syntactic innovations and there are quite some instances of such innovations at different stages of the old and middle English through the modern age. It is, however, logical to submit that any syntactic arrangement that changes a word’s class and alters an intended meaning cannot be described as innovative but disruptive. The word “only” put in the syntactic position of an adverb when intended to be an adjective cannot be an exception.

Zimmermann (2017) identifies two basic types of linguistic changes as the intrusive and the competitive, the former effecting additions to or subtractions from the communicative gamut of the languages in which they occur while the latter does merely involves substitutions of linguistic elements with synonyms. It is commendable that Zimmermann (2017) has identified these two types of general linguistic changes. As regards the syntactic application of this categorisation, a third type may be rightly added and that is the disruptive. The disruptive is neither subtracts/adds nor substitutes but alters word classes and semantic imports. Adequate knowledge of English syntax is, therefore, necessary to avoid the disruption.

There is, however, a great deal of brilliant arguments against explicit grammar teaching because doing so does not necessarily translate into the improvement of implicit grammar. Nevertheless, grammar still has to be taught but using a variety of strategies based on communicative approach as appropriate to particular learners’ needs and preferences (Golda, 2019). It will not be illogical to conclude that unhelpful teaching approaches and strategies rather than neglect of teaching of grammar must have contributed significantly to people’s misplacement of any grammatical or lexical item in sentences.

Rossiter (2021) asserts that that even native English speakers need the teaching of grammar of the language, acknowledges that there are a few exceptionally linguistically endowed people that may not need this, and suggests that grammar must be taught through good methods for people to achieve full literacy in the language.

As submitted by Costa (2004), certain intrinsic and non-intrinsic meanings of a particular adverb, its categorical status, domains of modification, and weight are among some dynamics of such an adverb to critically consider before one can adequately understand properly and use it. And these attributes do not essentially converge. It is logical that this narrative is also applicable to adjectives.

Though Buillon, Allen, and D'Arcy (2020) observed an interplay of linguistic constraints and social variables as determinants of placement of adverbs, it is evident in the sources of the data collected in this current study that the observed semantically confusing placement of “only”, meant to be an adjective but used as an adverb, defies socio-cultural boundaries. Examples are drawn across the globe and different social strata. Perhaps the interplay of linguistic constraints and social variables cut across countries.

Materials and Method

The descriptive survey method was employed for the two-tiered study. The first stage involved the collection of authentic texts in which the word “only” was used as an adverb where it obviously was intended to be an adjective. Accidental sampling method was adopted. The data were collected as the researchers chanced upon them in various places including virtual spaces over a period of three months. The data were subjected to syntactic and semantic analyses. A total of 53 of such texts were obtained and analysed. However, space could accommodate 20 of them.

The second part of the study involved 200 randomly sampled Nigerian speakers of English in Ibadan metropolis. They were asked to react to applicable authentic texts on notice boards or an advertisement. Where these were not available, two of the texts earlier obtained from the first stage were used. They were asked, with the use of an interview guide, to identify any word that had been misplaced, thereby causing a semantic shift. If they were still unable to identify the word, the placement of the word “only” was brought to their attention for scrutiny.

Qualitative syntactic analysis was used to answer Research Questions 1 and 2. Frequency counts and percentages were employed to answer Research Questions 3 and 4.

Findings

To answer these first three research questions, the data collected over three months from various sources in form of extracts from spoken and written texts shall be analysed as follows.

Research Question 1: Do English language speakers actually misplace the adjective “only” in their spoken and written sentences?

1. (This) only includes users who have made their subscriptions public.

This sentence, retrieved from YouTube Settings on 8th January, 2021, literally means the reference does nothing other than include users who have subscribed publicly to a channel. However, it is logical to submit that the attribute of the reference that is being pointed out as exclusive is the list of its content. The arrangement of the components should read:

(This) includes only users who have made their subscriptions public. (Correct placement) Or

(This) includes users who have made their subscriptions public only. (Correct placement)

Rather than make “only” modify the verb “includes”, it ought to have been positioned to pre-qualify the noun “users” or the entire noun phrase “users who have made their subscriptions public”, which is the focus of the exclusivity.

2. It is confidential and may only be released for legitimate transactions.

This caveat stated by the Federal republic of Nigeria on National Identification Number Slips has the word “only” meant to be used as an adjective wrongly placed where it functions as an adverb, thereby shifting the intended focus from the noun phrase “legitimate transaction” to the verb phrase “be released”. It is incontrovertible to conclude that for legitimate transactions, releasing the number is not the only thing that can be done; it can be copied, verified and stored or rejected/deleted by the receiving party. The obvious focus of exclusivity in the sentence is the condition of legitimacy, hence only legitimate transaction but not only release is intended. The sentence could have been correctly written as:

It is confidential and may be released only for legitimate transactions. (Correct placement) Or

It is confidential and may be released for legitimate transactions only. (Correct placement)

3. We are only accepting unpublished work with this contest. This sentence was copied on 7th April, 2021 from the Emerging Poet Prize announcement (<https://www.palettopoetry.com/current-contest/>)

Consequent upon the misplacement of “only” before the verb “accepting” rather than the noun phrase “unpublished work”, the exclusive focus of the sentence has been misplaced. Simple logic proves that “accepting” is not the only thing being done by the contest organisers; they are accepting, reading, sending out, selecting winning entries, distributing prizes,

printing, publishing and promoting the winning entries. All these are clearly stated in the narrative of the contest announcement. The focus of exclusivity is the adjective “unpublished” but not “accepting” as the misplacement of the adjective suggests.

We are accepting only unpublished work with this contest.(Correct placement) Or

We are accepting unpublished work only with this contest.(Correct placement)

4. There is no limit to what you can achieve. The limit is only set by you.

This statement is credited to Bhawna Gautam. It is another example of what is intended to be an adjective but now turned adverb and thereby altering the meaning significantly. It is certain that “only” has been wrongly placed in the sentence because setting of a limit only is not significant enough for attention. People that set limits for themselves do more by living by the limit and do many other things stipulated by the limits they have set. Setting of limits is not intended to be the focusing exclusive in the message. The sentence’s intended meaning becomes apt if re-expressed as:

There is no limit to what you can achieve. The limit is set by you only (Correct placement)

There is no limit to what you can achieve. The limit is set by only you (Still ambiguous though nearer the intended meaning than the original statement).

5. ORCID iDs can only be assigned by the ORCID Registry.

Is the assignment of ORCID iDs the only work done by the ORCID registry? Does the registry go to sleep after assigning the iDs? The answer suggested by the above-quoted statement is in the affirmative. However, this is obviously not true. The obviously intended focus of exclusivity here is the ORCID Registry but not the assignment of iDs as suggested by the syntactic proximity of “only” to the verb phrase “be assigned”. An intended adjective thus becomes an adverb. The correct placement of “only” should be as in:

ORCID iDs can be assigned by the ORCID Registry only.(Correct placement)

Only the ORCID Registry can assign ORCID iDs.(Correct placement)

6. Note: The Fulbright program is a popular program, the Public Affairs Section will ONLY NOTIFY SHOTRLISTED - <https://ng.usembassy.gov/education-culture/exchange-programs/foreign-language-teaching-assistant-program-flta/>

The question, “After notifying the shortlisted, what next does the Fulbright’s Public Affairs Section do?” would reveal that after the notification stage, the Section does other thing including release of funds and other necessary processes. The Section does not “only notify” but “only the Public Affairs Section” notifies the shortlisted.

Only the Public Affairs Section will notify the shortlisted. (Correct placement)

The Public Affairs Section only will notify the shortlisted.(Correct placement)

7. Democracy will only return to Nigeria when Buhari leaves office.
Source: Sure News of April 25, 2021 on the Phoenix News, an online news platform.
It says democracy will only return to Nigeria, with no attendant results, and bases it on a condition. The intended meaning obviously is:
Democracy will return to Nigeria only when Buhari leaves. (Correct placement)
Democracy will return to Nigeria when Buhari leaves only. (Correct placement)
8. Right now, you can only buy this meat here in Singapore.... But soon enough, this kind of meat would be available everywhere.
This is the sign-off statement in a news broadcast by NASDAILY.
The concluding part (but soon enough, this kind of meat would be available everywhere) is a clear pointer to the intended semantic function of only and what should have been its correct syntactic position. The focusing exclusivity is on Singapore at present, getting the meat everywhere else is futuristic. However, placing “only” syntactically close to the verb “buy” makes it a focusing intensifier to the verb rather than its supposed adjectival function to the noun “Singapore”. Saying “Right now, you can only buy this meat here in Singapore.,... but soon enough, this kind of meat would be available everywhere.” means the only thing you can do is buy the meat; you cannot sell, cook or eat it because buying is the exclusive action as indicated by “only buy”. The intended semantic function could have been achieved if the sentence placed close to “Singapore” as:
Right now, you can buy this meat here in Singapore only,... but soon enough, this kind of meat would be available everywhere.(Correct placement)
Right now, you can buy this meat only here in Singapore,... but soon enough, this kind of meat would be available everywhere. (Correct placement)
9. A journey only becomes a journey once you’re clear about the destination, otherwise it’s just aimless wandering – Corkey Calhour, Sermon Quotes (Misplaced “only”)
A journey becomes a journey only once you’re clear about the destination, if otherwise it’s just aimless wandering. (Correct Placement of only)
A journey becomes a journey once you’re clear about the destination only, if otherwise it’s just aimless wandering. (Correct Placement of only). The exclusivity is being clear about your destination.
10. We only give value for approved transactions– Gilead Pharmacy and Supermarket, Challenge, Ibadan, Nigeria.(Misplaced “only”)

We give value for approved transactions only.(Correct placement)

We only give value for only approved transactions. (Approval of transaction is the exclusivity but not giving of value).(Correct placement)

11. Tellers will only attend to customers who are on queues. IBTC Bank, Challenge, Ibadan, Nigeria (Misplaced “only” modifies the verb “attend” rather than being on queues which is the approved conduct for customers) Tellers will attend to customers who are on queues only.(Correct placement)

Tellers will attend to only customers who are on queues.(Correct placement)

12. Please note that research on use of XR in K-12 schools will only be reviewed if situated in the study of teacher education (in service or preservice).

This statement was copied from Journal of Technology and Teacher Education, Call for Special Issue Proposals on: Empirical Studies of Extended Reality in Teacher Education.

Placement of “only” before “be reviewed” means no other thing would be done about the research on XR in K-12 schools than review. Is this the intended meaning? No. Such research papers would be reviewed, probably accepted, edited and published in the journal. Therefore, the appropriate placement of the focusing exclusive adjective “only” to reflect the intended meaning would be as in:

Please note that only research on use of XR in K-12 schools will only be reviewed if situated in the study of teacher education (inservice or preservice). (Correct placement) Or

Please note that research on use of XR in K-12 schools only will be reviewed if situated in the study of teacher education (inservice or preservice). (Correct placement)

In the two sentence structures above the word only is an adjective pre-qualifying and post-qualifying the noun phrase “research on the use of XR in K-12 schools” respectively while in the original sentence, it is an adverb modifying the verb phrase “be reviewed”.

13. A change of behaviour only glorifies God if it is motivated by a change of heart. This statement was received from SermonQuotes on 10th April, 2021. The word “only” is place where it unintentionally makes “glorifies” the focus of exclusivity whereas it is clear that the actual focus of the statement is the conditional “if it is motivated by a change of heart”. A change of behaviour does not only glorify God but does a series of other things like attracting favour to a person, bringing peace to self and society, and so on. The only condition that is the focus of the sentence is clear in: A change of behaviour glorifies God only if it is motivated by a change of heart.(Correct placement)

- A change of behaviour glorifies God if it is motivated by a change of heart only. (Correct placement)
14. This is only for the initiated – SadGuru in Something Phenomenal Happens at 4.30am
This is for only the initiated. (Correct placement) Or
This is for the initiated only. (Correct placement)
15. Language maintenance will only be possible if there is a high degree of contacts with a very influential language like English and conscious efforts by the language group itself. - Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 2, No. 12, p. 2491
Language maintenance will be possible only if there is a high degree of contacts with a very influential language like English and conscious efforts by the language group itself. (Correct placement)
16. The three Nigerian languages can only be used “when adequate arrangements have been made therefor” – p.7
The three Nigerian languages can be used only when adequate arrangements have been made therefor. (Correct placement) Or
The three Nigerian languages can be used when adequate arrangements have been made therefor only. (Correct placement)
17. The process of giving will only serve to open your world in ways you could not even begin to imagine. ... Adam Richards, quoted in Our Daily Manna 19(4,5,6), 111,
Only the process of giving will only serve to open your world in ways you could not even begin to imagine.
18. that set of teaching and learning practices only possible in the context of the free access and 4R permissions characteristic of open educational resources” (Wiley, 2013, final paragraph) Wiley, D. (2013, October 21). What is open pedagogy? Iterating toward openness [Blog post]. <http://opencontent.org/blog/archives/2975>
that set of teaching and learning practices possible only in the context of the free access and 4R permissions characteristic of open educational resources (Correct placement)
that set of teaching and learning practices possible in the context of the free access and 4R permissions characteristic of open educational resources only (Correct placement)
19. You can only claim parcels if you have a valid means of identification – Jamal Cargos Servces, Lagos, Nigeria.
You can claim parcels only if you have a valid means of identification (Correct placement).
20. You can only succeed if you work hard (Source: Joy Extramural Institute, Ibadan, Nigeria)
You can succeed only if you work hard (Correct Placement).

The foregoing data and their analyses provide answer to Research Question 1. English language speakers actually misplace the adjective “only” in their spoken and written sentences. It is to be put on record that a total of 51 of such sentences were found, out of which the twenty are analysed in this report. If Modern English of today is actually rigidly strict about placement of words because of the meaning determining impact according to their syntactic positions in sentences, as pointed out by Pop (2018), one then wonders if English language speakers are corrected by anyone for placing “only” where it changes the intended focus.

Research Question 2: Does the misplacement of the adjective “only” have any semantic implications in a sentence?

As made obvious from the analysis of each sentence considered, the misplacement of the adjective “only” shifts the semantic focus away from the nouns they are intended to intensify to the verbs that they are inadvertently placed near. It is noteworthy that an intensifier is highly dispensable but it is added deliberately for the purpose of emphasis. Therefore, placing it unintentionally near a verb when it is meant to strengthen a noun diverts the emphasis from the intended message. This has been repeatedly demonstrated in the analyses of the data.

Research Question 3: Does the misplacement of the adjective “only” result in communication breakdown among interlocutors?

To answer this question, two hundred English speakers in Ibadan, a Nigerian metropolis, were asked to read two examples of the sentences containing misplaced adjective “only” and express the messages conveyed to them by the sentences. The following data were obtained.

Table 1: Statistical Representation of Degree of Negative Communicative Impact of Misplacement of “Only” in Authentic Texts

S/N	Categories	Frequencies
1.	Those that noticed the misplacement and identified the focus displacements unaided (7.5%)	15
2.	Those that quickly identified the focus displacement with little aid (39%)	78
3.	Those that required much effort to understand that there was any grammatically precipitated meaning disruption (44.5%)	89
4.	Those that did not notice the misplacement despite	18

6.	the researchers’ explanation (9%)	
	Total	200
	(100%)	

Table 1 shows that the misplacement of the word “only” is rarely noticed. Therefore, it does not impede communication despite the distortion meanings pointed out in the examples analysed earlier in this study. The preponderance of this errors indicate that many English users that commit this error lack the ability to detect it in other people’s efforts at communication. Ambiguity of syntactic elements precipitates abstruseness of semantic understanding of sentences (Pop, 2010). The misplacement of the word “only” however defies this logical submission.

A logical explanation to the seeming non-interference of this meaning distortion in people’s reception of the intended messages can be found the observation by Canagarajah (2018) of the mediating and shaping contributions of non-verbal resources to language use and communication. The correct messages must have been accessed inadvertently as the receivers of the messages automatically utilise the facilities of personal experience and social contexts. The meaning-distorting misplacement may, therefore, not be noticed. Other scholars (Djaborova, Eshonkulova & Babadjanova, 2020) attest to the collaborative roles verbal and non-verbal cues in meaning making.

Adverbs received the least attention from grammarians until recently (Kang, 2018). The inadequate knowledge about adverbs is one of the factors for people’s wrong placement of the word “only” in an adverbial position when it is supposed to function as an adjectival. People that know the syntactic positions of an adverb would not put any word meant to function differently in an adverbial position. This common error also indicates inadequate knowledge about adjectives in particular and general syntactic rules.

Research Question 4: Are first-language speakers of English immune from misplacement of the adjective “only” in their English sentences?

Table 2: Geographical Distribution of the Observed Cases of Misplaced “Only” by Continents

S/N	English Language Status	Frequencies
1.	English-as-a- First-Language (33.33%)	17
2.	English-as-a-Second-Language (37.25%)	19
3.	English-as-a-Foreign-Language (13.73%)	7

4. Un-identified Status	8
(15.69%)	
Total	51
(100%)	

The answer to Research Question 3, as shown by Table 2, is that the misplacement of the adjective “only” is not peculiar to English speakers in any particular country. A plausible explanation to the higher incidence observed in Africa, most especially in Nigeria, is that the researchers had additional access to data from Nigeria in form of offline materials such as billboards, promotional flyers, face-to-face interactions and so on. The sources of data from other continents are limited to books and online materials.

Conclusion

The study has found a general preponderance of misplacement of the word “only” in English sentences both in speech and writing. This has been shown to place focus, emphasis and exclusivity on unintended sentence elements. This has always resulted in distortion of meanings. Strangely, this meaning distortion seems never to get in the way of intended messages. One obvious reason for this is the fact most consumers of the messages too are always perpetrating this syntactic crime.

Recommendations

1. Strategies to make the teaching of English grammar easier for teachers and its learning more fascinating to students should be researched into and employed. Prominence should be given the relevance of each grammar topic to real life situations so that students may have reasons to take the topics seriously and teach out-of-school neighbours.
2. Further studies should be conducted, especially to discover other factors that meditates the meaning disruptions occasioned by the misplacement of “only”.

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