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Etymology and the Development of L2 Vocabulary: The Case of ESL Students at the University of Botswana

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Abstract

Part of the history of English is that many of its words are of Graeco-Latinate origin. Hence, the vocabulary of the language comprises words which are short and familiar and those which are foreign and long (Quirk,1978, p. 138). However, both L1 and L2 users have to get acquainted with the second group, which dominates academic discourse. Our students are disadvantaged on two grounds. Firstly, vocabulary instruction for them seems quite deficient in scope and depth, and secondly, the students tend to acquire the vocabulary of academic discourse necessary for their success in tandem with the learning of concepts which come incased in words they are unfamiliar with. Our paper uses data collected from the students' writing over a period of twenty years to examine their specific problems relating to the etymology of English words. Two questions are addressed: What problems does the etymology of English words pose for ESL students? What measures can be adopted to alleviate these problems? We discuss confused pairs of words, pairs erroneously considered synonymous, and coinage resulting from student's lack of appropriate vocabulary. We recommend that teaching the etymology of words used in academic discourse would assist our students to improve their fluency in English.

Keywords: ESL, Botswana, vocabulary instruction, word origin, word structure, focus on form instruction

> The vocabulary of a language is the only part of it over which we can confidently assert that no single native speaker has total command. This is because the lexis is far vaster, and far less rigidly structured than other levels of language (Steven Dodd, 1993, p. 35).

1. Introduction

The dominance of the Roman Empire and its language in the period Before Christ and, for a long time, well into Christendom, is a historical fact. The Romans themselves owed a lot of their vocabulary and grammatical concepts to the Greeks. This was reflected in their discourses in the fields of commerce, politics, the law, medicine, natural sciences, literature and literary criticism, linguistics, and generally in all spheres of their lives. On the matter of linguistics, which is directly relevant to our paper, we quote from the Greek grammarian Dionysius Thrax's (c100BC) work, *Techne Grammatike*:

> A sentence is a combination of words, either in prose or verse, making complete sense. … Of discourse there are eight parts: noun, verb, particle, article, pronoun, preposition, adverb, and conjunction. A noun is a part of discourse having cases, indicating a body (as 'stone') or a thing (as 'education'), and is used in a common and a peculiar way (i.e. is common or proper) …. (in Dykema, 1961)

Dionysius Thrax provides such definitions for each of these 'parts of discourse', which we now call 'parts of speech'. The result of this debt is that many English words, especially those of academic English, are from Latin and Greek, the languages of learning during and for a long time after the Roman conquest of Britain. Latin enjoyed the prestigious status that English was later to occupy in the British Empire, and which it continues to in the post-colonial period, particularly in the academy, but also in the same domains in which the Romans used Greek and later, their own language, Latin. The crucial question, the answer to which points to the probable causes of our students' problems with English vocabulary, is this: Whose children are brought up exposed to discussions, in English, of commercial, political, legal, scientific, literary, linguistic, and other matters that daily affect all aspects of their lives? Part of our argument is that children who do have an early start in their acquisition of vocabulary have an advantage over others in the English classroom. 'Practice makes perfect.' They

are not likely to say 'Please borrow me some money', or, 'I want to appoint with you/I want to appoint you', which the others tend to do.

In an era when Latin and Greek have been phased out of most education systems in Africa, and in a country where they were never taught in public schools, it would be unrealistic to suggest that the solution to our students' problems with English words of Graeco-Latin origin would be to argue for these languages to be introduced in the schools. Rather we wish to argue for a deliberate effort to be made to place emphasis on vocabulary instruction in our syllabus. Currently, our assumption is that our students acquire the vocabulary of academic discourse necessary for success in their studies in tandem with their learning of concepts which come incased in words which they are meeting for the first time.

Our subjects, in both the literature and linguistics streams, are awash with terms and concepts from Greek and Latin. In our discussion on students' problems with English vocabulary, we use data collected from student essays on both **linguistics** and **literature** topics. Our students in their first and second years may in fact never have come across the names of these topics. For example, 'linguistics' comes from Latin *lingua* ~ tongue, and 'phonetics' from Greek *phon* ~ sound, as do the *-ology* of 'phonology', meaning the study of, and *semantikos* ~ significant. The second problem comes from individual words for concepts. Consider some of our students' regularly repeated phrase, 'the pulmonic egressive air-stream from the lungs', where, in addition to the tautology, 'egressive' is often confused with 'aggressive', both of which are etymologically traceable to Latin. Such students are being required to use terms which they do not yet own, having heard the lecturer use them in close proximity to each other. 'Pulmonic' comes from Latin *pulmunus*, for 'lung'. Yet as far as the students are concerned, the more common word 'lung' must still come into it all because it serves to show that they have understood what happens when we speak as explained by the lecturer, which unfortunately breeds the tautology.Our goal in this paper is to examine the place of etymology in vocabulary instruction for ESL students by investigating some of the specific vocabulary problems that our students encounter. Our study is guided by two research questions: What problems does the etymology of English words pose for ESL students? What measures can be adopted to alleviate these problems? A brief literature review on vocabulary instruction in general and in ESL context in particular, is presented in the following section.

2. Background

2.1 Vocabulary Instruction and ESL Learners

Vocabulary instruction, until the early 70s, was not considered an important component of language learning. In fact, Gleason (1961, p. 7) asserts that "in learning a second language, you will find that vocabulary is comparatively easy in spite of the fact that it is vocabulary that students fear most. The harder part is mastering new structures in both content and expression". The perspective that vocabulary lacks content and expression was dominant in the 60s. Consequently, research in vocabulary instruction was minimal, but the growing interest in lexical semantics and lexicology in the United Kingdom, as well the demographic changes generally in the advanced parts of the world, have given the impetus to research in vocabulary instruction. On the importance of vocabulary, Pikulski & Templeton (2004, p. 1) note that our language skills and word knowledge are a prerequisite to our ability "to function in today's complex social and economic worlds." They therefore consider a large, rich vocabulary and the skills for using those words as the greatest tools which students can be given. But beyond this, they also indicate that a large vocabulary is "predictive and reflective of high levels of reading achievement". Their view agrees with research findings on vocabulary and language proficiency which indicate lexical competence as a major determinant of academic success (see Saville-Troike, 1984; Chall, 1987; and Garcia, 1991, for example). Meara's study (1984) reveals that L2 university students actually have more lexical errors than grammatical errors. Similarly, Leki & Carson (1994) note that L2 students themselves consider vocabulary as a major obstacle to their progress, particularly with academic writing. What can be inferred from these findings is that the learners' lexical competence is critical to their general proficiency in the language. Laufer's (1986) argument that lexical competence is more important than grammatical accuracy is instructive.

In the second language environment, the acquisition of an adequate vocabulary size is important, given the fact that many learners come into contact with English, the target language, rather late. Many, for instance, encounter English for the first time between ages 7 and 8, when they begin schooling, especially if they do not have the privilege of attending preschool/kindergarten, and if their parents are not educated. Even when they are exposed to some form of vocabulary instruction, such instruction tends to be superficial, lacking in both scope and depth. A very important aspect of the vocabulary of a language is the spelling system. In fact, Alimi & Mathangwane (2006, p. 81) examine some of the factors affecting students' acquisition of English vocabulary and spelling. In their view, three major factors militate against the students' success: the phonology of L1, the semantic system of

L1, and the learners' misapplication and confusion of English morphological rules. While these factors may indeed have their negative effects, obviously, for a language like English, mastery of its spelling is challenging, given the fact that it is fraught with inconsistencies, which are a product of its debt to other languages, especially Greek and Latin. For example, English has the following five different ways of representing one sound: **sh**oe, *ma**ch**ine, *mo**t**ion, *mi**ss**ion, **sch**edule, *appre**c**iate, all of which, except 'shoe', are of Latin origin.

Part of the history of English is evident in the fact that many of its words are of Latin or Greek origin. Smith (1995) indicates that as much as 50% of English words is derived from Latin-based words, while a host of others is from Greek. Quirk (1974, p.138) also draws attention to the nature of English vocabulary. According to him, it comprises two categories. The first contains "the familiar, homely sounding and typically very short words", namely those of Anglo-Saxon origin, while the second is of "the more learned, foreign sounding and characteristically rather long words", those of Greek and Latin origin. Crucially for our discussion, it is the second category which dominates academic English. While both L1 and L2 users have to become acquainted with these words, the former seem to be advantaged in view of their cultural capital.

Corson (1997) demonstrates the prevalence of words from Latin and Greek in academic English by referring to Nation's (1990) "University Word Lists". These lists provide a broad preliminary coverage of texts for use by ESL learners. Of the common 150 words, only six entered the English language from elsewhere, the remaining 144 being Latinate in origin. It seems, therefore, that it is imperative for teachers of English to provide instruction on the latter type of words in the ESL environment in order to address the vocabulary needs of such learners. In linguistics in particular, it is this academic vocabulary that constitutes an important part of the metalanguage that students need to master to insure success in their studies. This is why many scholars have made a case for the teaching of word origin as one of the strategies that can be adopted to assist second language learners boost their vocabulary development. Bellomo (1999) draws attention to the importance of word origin by assessing its impact on learners from two different backgrounds: learners whose L1 is Latin based (LB), and those whose L1 is non-Latin based (NLB). Although his goal was to demonstrate that the teaching of etymology does not necessarily advantage LB students, his findings show that both LB and NLB learners could benefit from the incorporation of word origin into vocabulary instruction. In fact, etymology for him constitutes a word attack strategy, especially with respect to Latin based vocabulary. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1989, p. 440) extends to vocabulary acquisition. His argument is that "vocabulary and spelling are acquired in fundamentally the same way the rest of language is acquired". It can be inferred from this that teaching word origin could serve as some form of comprehensible input that enhances vocabulary development.

Insights from psycholinguists have also shown that morphological principles are fundamental to word processing, though their application of them varies across languages. A learner's ability to decompose words into their component parts becomes integral to comprehension, storage and recall. Carlisle (2000) for example, posits that since morphemes are the basic units of language structure and meaning, it follows that instruction that emphasizes word structure will facilitate the development and acquisition of new words, since learning morphologically complex words involves developing mental representations of both bound and free morphemes. Taft (2003) also notes that information relating to morphemic and sub-morphemic features is useful for word identification in spoken and written texts because such information serves to connect form and meaning. As Corson (1997, p. 700) argues, knowing the meaning of an academic word involves knowing how to use it within an appropriate meaning system. To achieve this will entail making these words more visible in the curriculum so as to increase students' contact and acquaintance with them.

The fact that academic English is predominantly made up of words from Latin and Greek also strengthens the need for the integration of morphology into vocabulary instruction. Carlisle (2003, p. 292) (citing Bowey (1994)) and Moats (2000) indicates that both morphological and grammatical awareness are aspects of linguistic awareness that are "critical to the development of word reading and reading comprehension" for children as they proceed beyond their early school years. With respect to adults, Carlisle (2003, p. 294) notes that knowledge of their morphological composition is beneficial to reading of complex words, especially since "morphemes serve as efficient building blocks." With adequate and relevant instruction in morphology, learners in general, and ESL ones in particular, can be assisted to develop their word knowledge. For example, the word *pulmonic*, as noted earlier, has its origin in Latin *pulmunus*, for 'lung', but it has a derivational suffix *ic*, which is adjectival. Thus, both clues, its origin and its morphemic composition, can be used to derive its meaning and serve as aids to its retention. Moats (2000, p. 59) succinctly summarises the relevance of language instruction that is inclusive of word structure for first language learners:

> Especially since the demise of Latin in the high school curriculum, it has been uncommon for instructional materials in word recognition, vocabulary, and spelling to systematically explicate the structural

> components of words and morphological relationships among words. Yet knowledge of word meaning, rapid word recognition, and spelling ability greatly depend on knowledge of word structure at the level of morphemes.

Indeed, if first language learners require systematic instruction in morphology to aid their development of word knowledge, ESL learners stand to benefit from not only such a programme, but also from one which more deliberately incorporates word origin. In fact Henry's (1988) work (cited in Carlisle (2003, p. 314)), which specifically aimed at developing children's awareness of word structure and origin, proposed a layered approach to the teaching of English vocabulary, beginning with the Anglo Saxon layer, and followed by the Latinate and Greek layers.

2.2 Form Focused Instruction (FFI)

All of the above is indicative of the tremendous benefits of the incorporation of word origin and word structure in vocabulary instruction and, in fact, raises the issue of how much benefit learners, in our context, can derive from instruction that is focused on form as a type of comprehensible input. Form Focused Instruction (FFI) is a pedagogical approach that is aimed at stemming the inadequacies of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) especially with respect to second language learners. CLT is premised on the assumption "that comprehensible input and meaning oriented tasks are necessary and sufficient for language acquisition" (Laufer & Girsai, 2008, p. 694). One of the major weaknesses of CLT is that the approach rarely enables second language learners to attain the required high levels of grammatical competence. Although FFI, an approach that involves the teaching of linguistic structures and their functions, and which may be of two types, namely focus on form (FonF) and focus on forms (FonFs), was primarily conceived to address the learning of grammar, Laufer & Girsai (2008, p. 695) advocate its applicability to vocabulary. Ellis' (2001) distinction (cited in Laufer & Grisai (2008, p. 695) between two types of learners is based on the learners' perception of themselves. Some view themselves as language users who need the language as a tool for communication (FonF), in which case structures and functions are addressed as part of communicative activities. Others view themselves as language learners with English as an object of study (FonFs), in which case discrete linguistic structures and their functions are taught in accordance with a prescribed syllabus. Irrespective of the controversies as to which of the two approaches, FonF or Fonfs, is more effective, it is our view that our students, who primarily view English as the object of study, will benefit from both approaches. This will be demonstrated later in this paper.

2.3 English Programme at the University of Botswana

The English programme at the University of Botswana, whose goal is to provide advanced study of English and promote proficient and discriminating use of the language, "comprises two broad areas, Language and Literature" (Alimi & Ellece, 2003, p. 246). By design therefore, our students are required to take courses in both areas. The courses in language are essentially focused on English linguistics, while those in literature cover a broad spectrum of areas including English literature, African literature and literature of the Diaspora. In terms of vocabulary instruction, our students are exposed only incidentally to the vocabulary of academic discourse.

As Knight (1994, p. 285) notes, "first and second level courses stress vocabulary knowledge through their different textbooks", but whenever a shift occurs involving the introduction of authentic texts (literary), then vocabulary knowledge becomes relegated. This observation highlights some of the challenges that a programme comprising both linguistics and literature could be faced with. In the study of literary texts, the emphasis may shift from the medium to the message, thereby automatically downgrading vocabulary learning from the intentional to the incidental. This observation is pertinent in view of some of the problems that will be discussed in the rest of this paper and further strengthens the need for a deliberate plan of action to increase our students' awareness of the vocabulary of academic discourse.

As indicated earlier, our goal in this paper is to discuss some of the problems that our students experience in their learning and use of English vocabulary. We specifically focus on the vocabulary of academic discourse which, as highlighted in the literature, comprises mainly the Graeco-Latin words. We examine the etymology related problems that our students encounter and make suggestions on how to remedy them.

3. Methodology

The data for this paper comes from student answers to assignment, test and examination questions on both linguistics and literature topics. Collected manually over a period of twenty years, this data displays various problems which our students have in processing and grasping not only the peculiarities of English vocabulary, which is the focus of this paper, but also aspects of its morphological, syntactic and semantic structures.

The initial stage in collecting the data involved listing errors and mistakes committed by our students in their

assignment, test, and examination answers in tandem with marking and commenting on each script. In the process, it became clear to us that it made no significant difference whether the students were writing under the restrictive and intimidating conditions of the test and examination or under the less stressful conditions of the assignment. Their work carried the same numbers and types of mistakes and errors attributable to their lack of knowledge of the structure, meaning and, crucially, the etymology of English words. Later, these tokens were put together under the three domains of assessment activity mentioned above which yielded them. While the ID numbers of their authors were recorded, their names were not, with the exception of those scripts which were kept as evidence. This produced a hold-all database which contained errors and mistakes in all these aspects of English. The contents thereof soon persuaded us to the view that some aspects of the problematic vocabulary were traceable to its historical sources. While they do have some problems with words of Anglo-Saxon and French origin, it is apparent to us that our students are particularly weak when it comes to those which are traceable to the Classical languages, Latin and Greek. And, since these languages have bequeathed a considerable proportion of the vocabulary used in most academic fields, including our own, we decided that this should be our starting point. So the database which our paper is mining has now been reshaped, with the vocabulary, syntax and semantics tokens listed under the language to which they can be traced, although there remain a few grey areas owing to the usual give-and-take between languages in contact where the Latin and Greek tokens are concerned.

In order to facilitate our discussion, we have categorized our data as follows. The first contains confused pairs of words owing to problems with understanding their morphological structure and, secondly those pairs erroneously regarded as synonyms. We also have data that evidences the lack of appropriate vocabulary on the part of students. This leads to word coinage, another category. Finally, there is a group of words which are regularly spelt wrongly. We argue that all these problems arise from students' unfamiliarity with English words generally, but particularly with those used widely in academic discourse, which are etymologically traceable to Greek and Latin.

4. Discussion

In this section we address the first research question for the study: What problems does the etymology of English words pose for ESL students? Our discussion is categorized under the following headings: the vocabulary of phonology, morphology and sociolinguistics, and the vocabulary of comprehension, composition and literary texts. First we discuss the vocabulary of phonology, morphology and sociolinguistics.

4.1 The Vocabulary of Phonology, Morphology and Sociolinguistics

Because the focus of phonetics and phonology is for us to understand how parts of the human body, especially the so-called speech tract, function to produce speech, the vast majority of the terms which we employ come from Greek and Latin, the languages which provided the vocabulary of medical discourse. To succeed in their studies therefore, our students have to acquire a basic knowledge of the terms used in the fields of human anatomy and physiology, which are concerned with the study of the structures and functions of parts of the human body, respectively. For our discussion in this section, we will refer to the following excerpts taken from the students' writing:

1. The *pulmonic* air from the lungs...
2. The sounds [w] and [j] are called *apporoximanants*.
3. Consonants are produced when the parts of speech *articulate* with each other.
4. *Retrogressive* assimilation…
5. Parts of the *oratory* system…

The noun phrase *the pulmonic air from the lungs* represents a common mistake which our students commit in their essays when they write on phonetics and phonology topics. The word *pulmonic* is derived from the Latin term *pulmo*[1] (lung). The tautology in the phrase denoted by the post modifier *from the lungs* is a result of the students' lack of familiarity with the origin and therefore the meaning of the term 'pulmonic'. The air-stream in question is called 'pulmonic' precisely because it flows from the lungs, making the phrase 'from the lungs' extraneous. In fact, the usefulness of information on word origin and, by implication, the consequences of the lack of that information, is more vividly depicted by how the students' use the terms *approximant, regressive* and *articulate*. The term *approximan*t comes from the Latin prefix *ad-*, meaning 'towards' or 'in addition to', 'being attached to' *proximare* 'to come near'. The problems of misspelling, word confusion and wrong word use associated with these three words are caused by the students' lack of morphological knowledge. They will most likely know the meaning of the word 'approximately', though may be not that of the cognate verb 'approximate'.

They need to learn that there are several English nouns derived from verbs in the same way that 'approximant' is derived from 'approximate': contest ~ contestant, defend ~ defendant, receive ~ recipient, occupy ~ occupant, respond ~ respondent, adhere ~ adherent, account ~ accountant, participate ~ participant, and so on, all from Latin roots. As for the semantic relationship between the verb and the derived noun, they need to know that the suffix in all such nouns has the same function as the very productive '-er' in other derived agentive nouns: namely the doer of the action of the verb. That is, a 'contestant' is one who 'contests', just as a 'reader' is one who 'reads'. This would form part of a more inclusive study of affixation in vocabulary instruction.

'Regressive', on the other hand, is here confused with 'retrogressive', obviously because these two have the same Latin root, 'gressus', 'a step, course', with the reversive prefix 're-' attached to it. Also the terms *articulate* and *oral* originate from the Latin term *articulus,* which literally means 'composed of segments united by joints' and has the general sense of "speaking accurately", and *oralis*, from Latin *Oris*, which means "mouth, opening, face, entrance", respectively. The confusion with some other words and the misspelling of them has arisen because the students are unaware of the etymological relationship between the English words and their Latin cognates. They are also not predisposed to using the morphological information about each of the words as clues for comprehending them. By implication, the students do not 'know' these words, though their lecturers rehearse them over and over again during the 15 week semester, and are unable to integrate them into their semantic network from which they could recall them for future use. The reference to 'parts of speech [articulating] with each other' comes as an instance of wrong cross-disciplinary importation in which a term from syntax, 'parts of speech', has been confused with 'parts of the speech *tract*'. This last word will be unfamiliar to our students. But for mother-tongue speakers of English, it is a moribund metaphor which they have assimilated along with other words of Latin origin. 'Tract' comes from the Latin verb 'traho', whose formal scatter is *traho*, *trahere*, *trexi*, *tractum*, meaning 'drag', 'pull', and from which we also get the word 'tractor'. 'Tract' is widely used by native speakers of English in expressions such as 'digestive tract', 'urinary tract' and, more relevantly here, 'respiratory tract', apart from 'huge tracts of forest', 'huge tracts of desert', and 'huge tracts of farmland', and so on. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2005), from which these examples come, is part of our 'Recommended Reading' list of books.

Even in cases where certain words are considered synonymous, the misconception seems also to arise from the students' lack of foundational knowledge of word origin. Examples of such pairs include the following:

6. In the articulation of [d] air is *captured* in the oral cavity.
7. Linguistic *competence* is the relations found between languages and their relationships.
8. Any language is *superior* and can stand on its own with other languages. It has to have structures; grammar and *competence* in association with other languages.

The Latin cognate for *capture* (detain or imprison) is *captura*, meaning 'a taking' (an animal, for example). Since the sound [d] is a stop, the textbooks and lecturers explain that the flow of pulmonic air is momentarily stopped by the articulators before it is *released*. This last word may have inspired the conscription of a word from what the students may have read about wild life management. Similarly, the Latin cognate for *competence* is *competens*, which means 'to have sufficiency to deal with something', while *compete,* the root of the word *competition*, is derived from the Latin *competere*, 'to strive together'. While 'compete' and 'competition' will have been familiar since they are used regularly in discussions of school sporting events, the abstract noun 'competence' is a more learned expression than 'competition'. Thus, example 7 is inspired by the students' knowledge of competition, but this is coupled with a misunderstanding of 'superior'. The thrust of the answer is that all languages are equal, yet it is also stated that any one of them is 'superior'.

Our students' use of sociolinguistics terms is not different from that which they make of terms in the other disciplines. The first interesting observation here is their definition of *bilingualism* as *'the double linguistics'*, (example 9) which comes from them considering *bi* and *double* as perfect synonyms. While *bi* (two, twice, double) is from Latin *doble,* 'two face, two fold' and, by implication, 'deceitful', the Latin term *duplus* meaning *twice as much* or *two fold*, from which English derives the word *duplicity*, is the French cognate for *double*. *Lingual* is from the Latin term for tongue, *lingua*. Perhaps the confusion with respect to the use of *bi* and *double* is in the extent to which they can inter-substitute. While *double* can be attached to deverbal nouns such as *speak* and *talk*, it does not collocate with any term derived from *lingua*.

9. Bilingualism is the double linguistic.
10. Register = this means what you <u>do</u> or <u>occupy</u>, this includes you proffession, like a lawyer, Doctor, lecture, these occupation are important in the standardization of language, It has to go through the register.

Sometimes students erroneously perceive certain words as homophones. This could result in sentences which are meaningless, as in example 10 where it is likely that *register* is taken as the same word as *registrar*. Even though both words are remotely related (*register* is from Latin *regesta*, meaning a list, and *registrar* is from *registrarius*, one who keeps records), they are by no means distinct lexical items in English:

4.2 Vocabulary of Comprehension, Composition and Literary Texts

Answering questions which are based on comprehension texts has historically been viewed as a reliable tool for assessing both L1 and L2 students' developing competence in their learning of a language. And so this sub-section focuses on vocabulary problems which our informants encounter in defining and otherwise recognizing words in comprehension texts.

The particular text was on the subject of the various types of insurance policies that are available on the market. Because it said that most such policies are 'voluntary', the students were asked to use that word in a sentence of their own in order to demonstrate that they had understood this aspect of insurance. Below are some of the striking answers.

11. There are many *voluntary* people in the Red Cross.
12. English literature is a *voluntary* subject at secondary school.
13. The nerves function *voluntary* towards things which are not hot.

Presumably, the students knew that many people who work for the Red Cross are volunteers; that literature is an optional subject at the secondary school and that the nerves operate on reflex, which are involuntary, to coordinate the general functioning of the body. Thus, examples 11 and 12 demonstrate a clear confusion of "voluntary" with "optional", both etymologically traceable to the Latin adjective *voluntarius* and the verb *opto*, respectively. On the other hand example 13 is a reflection of students' lack of knowledge of affixes hence the use of "voluntary" for "involuntarily". Taken together with 'voluntary people' and 'voluntary subject', example 13 further suggests that for our students, this word means 'without any cost to the agent', the Red Cross hiring people without having to pay them, the student having the liberty of choosing to study or not to study a particular subject without risking failure, or the nerves touching an object without the risk of being burnt.

Popular answers to the question "what is the meaning of the sentence (in the text) 'some kinds of insurance are compulsory" include "You will have to take them. You have no choice. *So you are not compelled to take them*" (our emphasis). Does this mean that the morphological difference between "compulsory" and "compelled" has suggested that these two words are semantic opposites? Further, on the meaning of the word "disaster", we got "People are often called to pray for natural disasters such as drought and disease epidemics." Since 'disaster' is of French origin, this strange-sounding response can therefore not be explained in terms of its origin from the Classical languages. Rather, it is the student's mother-tongue interfering with their learning of the English idiom. In the Bantu language idiom, people pray *for* the sick (to heal), just as they pray *for* disease (not to cause death).

Another expression that confused students was "comprehensive policy", and that in a "comprehension" test. Several of them defined this type of policy as follows:

14. It is an *understandable* policy.
15. An *understandable* or favorable form of insurance.

The confusion seems to be due to the root English word "comprehend", from the Latin *comprehendere*, "to lay hold of", which came to mean "to grasp with the mind" in Middle English. This is the sense which the answers above reflect, instead of the one intended in the text on insurance. That one comes from a similarly structured but different Latin word, *comprehensivus*, an adjective meaning "of large content or scope". This same text also explained the role of the 'insurance broker', which led us to ask students to define the term. And we got one of them writing that "An insurance broker can contact you with one of the insurance companies and can also contact you with a number of writers", instead of "put you in contact with". Clearly, the writer is confused by the dual class membership of the Latin derived word "contact", from *contango*. In English, it is used either as a noun, as in "put you in contact with …", or as a verb, "to contact someone".

Another set of data came from three essays. The first is an essay in which students had to respond to the question, "Should the government spend more money on educating women than on educating men"?

16. Women have been *inferiorised* for a long time.
17. "[Women] should be equiped with education so that they can 'partake' such jobs", that is, well-paid jobs… They know the amount of children a family can support.

This data provides ample evidence to the claim that language learners do not come to the task with a tabula rasa mind. They are creative and they employ their prior learning in processing new knowledge. The downside of this is that such learners tend to over-generalize grammatical rules, a factor discussed by Alimi & Mathangwane (2006), which we referred to earlier. For example, inferiorise seemed sensible since "priority" gives us ''prioritize", Both words are from Latin "prior", meaning "former", "first", and "inferior", which was transplanted as it is. Since "women know the amount of children" and not the number, there is a confusion of "amount", "quantity", and "number", the last one coming from Latin *numerus*. In English, "partake" has come to be restricted to joining in sharing food. Here it is being confused with the phrase "to take part in".

The second essay was titled "A day I shall never forget". The most pleasing token of student creativity came from one who was writing a narrative piece on the topic above:

18. The driver was going at a very fast speed. Then a curve loomed ahead. Our bus and the lorry were both on the right hand side. Having *predicted* what was going to happen next, I closed my eyes and tried to recite the Lord's prayer, which I did not know well. My heart was beating at an **unbecoming** and **betraying loud rate**. I decided to strike a bargain with God, though I was not religious, that if he could avoid the accident that was just about to occur, I would never complain about my life again.

We draw attention to the word "predict", used here in an emergency context. Prediction normally occurs when there is temporal distance between now and a future event, from *pre-* which means "before", and *dico*, for "speak" or 'tell". Yet, even as the protagonist was face-to-face with danger, he predicted the accident. But the heart "beating at an unbecoming and betrayingly loud rate" is a creative jewel.

Writing on the topic, 'If you were the Minister of Education, what reforms would you implement to improve the system?', we had the following responses:

19. According to my observation education system is still lacking the *instinct* which can improve learning.

20. I find this *disjusting* … Now when the results comes out in September or October there is no *justice* in that.

The Latin word *instinctus* means "impulse" or "inspiration", which is clearly associated with human or living beings generally, rather than institutions. Here, "instinct" has been confused with "resources". Impulse and inspiration galvanize people into action, just as resources enable institutions to perform. There are two possible explanations for the problem in example 20. It could be a result of overgeneralization of the use of the reversive negative prefix **dis-**, which is used with verbs as in "dis-hearten", "dis-favor", "dis-connect", "dis-locate", but which in this case has been applied to the noun "justice". It is also possible that 'disjusting' is a misspelling of the word *disgusting*.

The prevalence of vocabulary which comes from the Classical languages is as evident in literary texts as in those on linguistics topics. And so our students experience similar problems here. In this section we discuss data from students' responses to questions on *Animal Farm*, *Things Fall Apart*, *The Lion and the Jewel* and *Julius Caesar*. The question on Orwell's novel required students to write an argumentative essay on the topic: '"Napoleon is a clever and admirable politician'. Do you agree?" Below are three examples of students' responses:

21. For him to maintain the farm very well, he used two instruments: terror represented by the dogs and lies and *propagand* speculated by the pig Squealer.

22. Those who were a threat to Napoleon were *prosecuted*, thus breaking the law which said 'No animal shall kill each other.'

23. ….those who did not work on Sundays would have their *rationals* cut off in half

The word "propaganda" is from the Latin verb *propago*, "to extend", "to prolong". The English version of this word will most probably have been unfamiliar to the students until they heard it in a lecture on the novel, and so they misspelled it. The use of "speculated" in connection with propaganda may be an attempt by the writer to sound learned. Examples 22 and 23 are instances of word confusion involving "execute" and "prosecute", and "ratio" and rationals". "Execute" and "prosecute" are from Latin *exsequi*, "to give effect to" and *prosequi*, "follow up, pursue", respectively. With "ratio" and "rationals", the Latin root of the word confused here has three different meanings. 'Ratio' means 'calculation'. This is the appropriate meaning used by Orwell, namely the calculated amount of food (ration) for each of the animals on the farm. One of the other meanings of 'ratio', which the student chose, is 'reasoning', 'cause', 'motive'.

Examples 24 and 25 below come from *Things Fall Apart* and arose from problems with both the etymology of English words and their morphology:

24. The first missionaries to arrive Umuofia are *located* (for allocated) a portion of land in the evil forest.

25. Apart from winning many titles and having many wives an elder could *narrate* a meeting.

Traces of the Latin preposition ***ad***, "to", "towards", "against", "near", are found in the letter "d" assimilating in a coalescent manner to the first letter of the root word. This is the case here with Latin ***ad*** + ***locatum*** yielding the English word "a**ll**ocate", just as ***ad*** + ***gressus*** yields "a**gg**ression", for example. 'Locate' may be an instinctive choice over 'allocate' for English learners in southern Africa where, during the colonial and apartheid periods, urban residential areas were divided into **suburbs** for White people and **locations** for Blacks. The same discrimination between the races was being practiced in Achebe's Umuofia between traditionalists and Christians. With example 25, the lecturer would have explained that a story such as the one the students were studying is called a "narrative", and may be had gone on to use the related verb, "narrate". The narrator of a traditional folktale occupies centre stage because s/he has both wisdom and eloquence, which come with age, just as an elder chairing a *Kgotla*[2] meeting in the novel speaks with authority. That may be why the role of an elder at a meeting in Ibo society is regarded as that of narrator. Yet the Latin verb 'narro', from which 'narrate' comes, means '[to] relate', 'recount', a sequence of events, to tell a story.

Just as the new term "narrative" caused problems for some students reading *Things Fall Apart*, so did the words "satire" and "irony" when they turned to writing on *The Lion and the Jewel*. The assignment question was, "In your opinion, who is the object of satire in *The Lion and the Jewel?"* This triggered the following remarkable responses:

26. *Lakunle's satire* made him a loser. He said these words [about Baroka] 'He is a savage thing, degenerate. He would beat a helpless woman …'. These words proved his *satireness* towards somebody.

27. There is a lot of *ivory* in *The Lion and the Jewel*.

Clearly, "satire" was a new term to the students. But it would have been stated by the lecturer that the play was of the satirical type, and that Lakunle was the object of the satire, rather than that satire was a feature of his character, a part of his psyche. Another new word was "irony", which, like "satire", is also of Greek origin and is used in discussions of literature. On reading example 27 above, one is tempted to remark, "Poachers be advised!" But seriously, whether in reading or in listening to these two words, *irony* and *ivory*, it is easy for one meeting them for the first time to confuse them, since they rhyme. But 'ivory' easily comes to the minds of students, such as ours in Botswana, to whose economy wild life tourism, which is threatened by poachers in search of ivory, contributes significantly to the GDP, being second only to diamonds.

The last set of examples is from *Julius Caesar*. Here we focus on students' answers to a question on Mark Antony and Cassius' roles in the play. Whereas we have already seen problems with the words "disgusted" and "justice", here we discuss others who stumbled on the word "justice" and the related one, "justify":

28. Antony manipulated the crowd to rise against Cassius and Brutus by *unjustifying* their killing of Caesar.

29. When Mark Antony speaks, the crowd realizes the *unjustification* of Caesar's death.

30. Brutus was a *patriotism*.

Examples 28, 29 and 30 clearly point to inadequate knowledge of the morphology of the words concerned and, equally clearly, of the variations in meaning signaled by affixes. The justification of a deed can be floored by the presentation of contradicting evidence, not by 'unjustifying' it. The word 'patriot' from the Latin term *patriota* "fellow-countryman" is probably not considered by the students as a noun and hence they thought that it required a noun deriving suffix, –ism-.

5. Measures to Alleviate Students' Problems

In this section we provide answers to the second question addressed in our paper: What measures can be adopted to alleviate these problems? We are aware of two sources of vocabulary and discourse problems for our students. The first is the etymology of the words and, in order to assist the students, we propose the teaching of word origin as part of the English studies programme.

Generally, our students learn English as the object of study in order to gain skills and knowledge that would equip them to teach in high schools or work in some other fields, such as the media or even the civil service. But since English is also the official language of the country and the medium of instruction, the students are expected to demonstrate high competence in the use of the language. Thus, we recommend that a course on word origin should be introduced into their curriculum. Such a course should be sufficiently rudimentary but it should adequately expose them to the historical antecedents of English words, particularly their major sources: Anglo Saxon, French/Norman, Latin and Greek. In view of the fact that the academic discourse is made up of words that are mainly of Greek and Latin origin, the students would benefit from instruction that focuses on Greek and

Latin roots, prefixes and suffixes and their implications for meaning. In essence, we are proposing vocabulary instruction that focuses on "discrete linguistic structures" (Laufer & Girsai, 2008, p. 695). It is expected that the gains from the 'focus on forms' approach would be reinforced and consolidated in the different courses as students' attention is drawn to vocabulary problems (wrong word use, confused spellings, wrong spellings) when they arise in the communicative activities in other courses as the students progress with their programme. This blended approach comprising FonFs and FonF should alleviate some of the students' vocabulary deficiencies both at the metalinguistic and communicative levels by raising their awareness, and developing and sharpening their word recognition skills. The approach should also be a means of promoting both explicit and implicit vocabulary learning.

The second source of our students' vocabulary problem is that there are very few, if any, textbooks which are written specifically for an African readership in our discipline. Even those written by African linguists such as Katamba (1994) are not too different in their English idiom from those written by others. Yet in explaining concepts, writers often inevitably resort to figurative expressions whose meanings, by definition, are not compositional, especially those of the metaphorical type. These are expressions which the writer and the prospective mother-tongue English reader share. We admit that such expressions are very useful, since they go for the jugular, so to speak! And many of them may even be dead metaphors, routinely used in everyday life by mother-tongue English speakers, but not by those who are meeting them for the first time, and in the face-threatening and competitive context of the classroom. Some metaphors may be carried by atomic, everyday words, yet their overall message, in the nature of metaphor, lies not in such words but in the cultural milieu. So the second possible solution to this problem is for us to commit ourselves to developing teaching materials written in an African, acculturated English in which we employ expressions which arise from our idioms.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed vocabulary problems that our students confront in processing academic discourse, including confused pairs of words owing to problems with understanding their morphological structure, and secondly, those pairs erroneously regarded as synonyms. We also examined data that evidences the lack of appropriate vocabulary on the part of students, which leads to word coinage, noting those words that are regularly spelt wrongly. We argue that all these problems arise from students' unfamiliarity with English words generally, but particularly with those used widely in academic discourse, which are etymologically traceable to Greek and Latin.

Given the evidence which we have presented, we are convinced that there is an urgent need for Departments of English such as ours to create space for vocabulary instruction. We currently leave vocabulary acquisition on back burner, hoping that our students will learn the words they need for success in their studies incidentally. Yet vocabulary is as central to our subject as all the other topics which we teach, in which our students could perform much better, if only we placed emphasis on vocabulary development, especially that of academic discourse. So we recommend that vocabulary instruction be made intentional rather than remain incidental, by us creating space in the syllabus for teaching it. Further, we believe that there is an equally pressing need for us to begin to produce texts in which we employ an explanatory meta-language which our students can process.

There are two other possible solutions to our students' problems with English vocabulary. These are that we assess them on reading English texts and on speaking in English even on topics not directly related to the syllabus. Concerning speaking, earlier generations of students used to be required to speak only in English on school premises. That helped to improve their grasp of the English idiom, although the punishment that came with transgressing this rule may now be indefensible. In our case here at the University of Botswana, which is not different from that in other Universities where the overwhelming majority of students have the same mother-tongue, students 'naturally' speak to one another, and to some of their lecturers, in the national language, Setswana. Both they and we are in a quandary: we unconsciously assert national pride by speaking to one another in the mother-tongue while negotiating, or being required to negotiate our place in an evolving global village where English is dominant. In our large classes, some of our students do not participate in discussions, nor do they ask questions on topics which they find difficult to follow. It occurs to us that such students will only speak in English when they are being interviewed for a job. As for reading, our students would benefit a great deal from going beyond the textbook, if they read that at all. As things stand, there is one pressing question, which is, 'What does one take to the village after spending years on campus, and then selling back to the bookstore all the books which the government enabled one to acquire – for both University and life-long learning?'

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Notes

Note 1. For the origin of many of the Latin words discussed in this paper, we consulted the Online Etymology Dictionary.

Note 2. Kgotla is the Setswana word for a place of meeting**.**