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Review Article

Syntactic Rules and Research Ethics: A Critical Exposition

Eucharia Ngozi Nwosu

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Abstract: It is quite worrisome that syntactic norms and values, which ideally guide the arrangement of words, phrases, clauses and other lexical categories, are not strictly upheld and followed by many researchers and even research bodies. That implies violating some basics of research ethics. This study rises to make a critical exposition of syntactic rules in research ethics, which are often violated. Relying on observation and secondary data, the study demonstrates that poor knowledge and negligence of syntactic rules largely accounts for the violation of syntactic rules in research works by researchers and many concerned research bodies. It shows that unacceptable grammatical structures have grave implications for the overall given research work. Also, phrase structure rules correlate with interpretative rules, just as syntax and semantics also correlate. The study concludes that since language is rule-governed, the violation of syntactic rules in research work implies the violation of language rules and research ethics. The study is anchored on the syntactic theory of Universal Grammar, which explains how standard syntactic rules and research ethics are universal, and must be followed in order to have acceptable and correct sentences and research.

Keywords: Syntactic rules, research ethics, violation, critical exposition, language, universal grammar

Introduction: Research means a systematic, procedural, principled and structured 'search again'(re-search) for knowledge, facts, ideas, innovations, improvement or betterment, discoveries, inventions, and the validation or otherwise of what has been searched and discovered or done in various human endeavours[1]. Research ethics basically revolves around norms and values guiding research activities[2]. In spite of the fact that there can be no research of any kind without language, the place of language in research in general and research ethics in particular is often neglected by many. This negligence is evident in the negligence of the gross violation of syntactic rules in research works and established statutory research ethics. Also, many persons seem unrealistic of the fact that all that research offers would remain unknown, undiscovered, unrevealed and so on without being communicated using language. In the words of Robert[1], 'no human activities can either be known or carried out without language use. The concern of this paper is on the rules of syntax (i.e. syntactic rules) in the course of using language for

Department of English and Literary Studies, Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe, Anambra, Nigeria
Email: eukaynwosu@gmail.com ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9424-3956

Corresponding Author: Eucharia Ngozi Nwosu, Email: eukaynwosu@gmail.com

research and its ethics.

Language use follows the applicable rules of the language. When language use does not follow the applicable rules of the language in research and/or research ethics, there is a violation of the rules of the language, neglecting the breach of language rules, such as syntactic rules[3]. The situation of syntactic errors (flaws) are even seen in some of the spelt-out conventional research ethics. At that point in time, linguistic misrepresentations also arise. It is against the foregoing backdrop that this study rises to make a critical exposition of syntactic rules and research ethics. In other words, given the consistent violation and negligence of these rules, this study rises to make a critical exposition of syntactic rules and research ethics, with a view to rousing a deserving attention to the backdrop. In the end, a valid conclusion shall be drawn from the analytical exposition of these two aspects of the paper.

Methodology: This position paper drew data from secondary data sources and observation. The secondary sources were got from the library and the internet. The internet sources were got through Google search engine. The sourced data were subjected to critical analysis, using text-content analysis. The keywords were syntactic rules, research ethics, violation, critical exposition, language, universal grammar.

Syntax and Syntactic Rules: Conceptual Analysis: Etymologically, syntax is a Greek word that means the arrangement of things[2]. Linguistically, syntax means the arrangement of words and morphemes into grammatically correct order in form of phrases, clauses and sentences to convey communicative content–messages[3]. As the level of linguistic analysis identifies how morphemes and words are combined to form phrases and clauses[3]. According to Nwala's_definition leaves out sentences, which is even the highest and most essential part of the combination of morphemes and words is meant to form. Nwala[2] notes that in the strict sense, 'syntax is not the same thing as grammar,' because it is rather an integral part of the grammar of a language which native speakers internalise. The grammar of a language is said to be a model of the linguistic competence of the native speakers, which comprises set of rules or principles that specify how to form, pronounce and interpret phrases, clauses and sentences[4, 3]. According to Nwala[3], 'the knowledge of the syntax of a language gives one the linguistic competence to know which words in a sentence 'go with' or 'modify' which other words; when to use certain words and when not to. This point tells of what syntactic rules do in specific and ethics does in general.

Linguistic structures so-formed are simply regarded as 'larger units'. Syntax concerns itself with the relationship between the finite and the infinite. That is to say every language has a finite number of words, which could be combined to form an infinite number of sentences. Chomsky (1957) has shown how the simple mathematical concept of a recursive function sheds crucial new light on the use of a finite number of words to form an infinite number of sentences[6]. He demonstrates how a finite number of words could be put together to form an infinite number of sentences thus:

(i) A sentence (S) consists of a Noun Phrase (NP), followed by a Verb Phrase (VP) [6].

(S → NP + VP)

As for example. Bangladesh Journal of Bioethics (NP) publishes (V) articles at a free-of-charge (VP).

'Bangladesh Journal of Bioethics' is a noun phrase consisting of three nouns (Bangladesh, journal and bioethics) and a preposition (of). The second part of the sentence is the VP, beginning with the verb 'publishes'. The VP comprises the lexical verb (publishes), the object of the sentence (articles), which is another noun, and the adjunct– Adj. (free-of-charge), which is a (nominal) adverb–complement.

(ii) A VP consists of a verb (V), possibly followed by an NP and/or a clause (CP).
(VP → V, or V + NP, or V + CP, or V + NP + CP)

As for example, the child was beaten for stealing from her mother's purse. NP (the child) = Determinant (Det.) + Noun (N), whereby Det. = the, and N = child; VP (was beaten for stealing from her mother's purse) = VP + Adj. VP = V (was, an auxiliary verb) + V (beaten, a lexical verb) + Adj. (for stealing, a nominal adverb telling why the child + from her mother's purse.

(iii) A Clause [Clausal] Phrase (CP) consists of an S, possibly preceded by a complementizer (C).

(CP → S or C + S)

As for example, we had gone to bed when our special visitor arrived. We = S_1, had gone = V, bed = S_2, special = C, visitor = S_3. When our special visitor arrived' is a clause ending with a verb 'arrived'. We (N), had gone to (VP – aux. Verb (had) + lexical verb (gone) + prep. (to) pointing at bed, being what they had done before the arrival of their special visitor).

As what concerns rules and patterns of word combination and arrangement, it is noted that "Syntax is primarily concerned with whether a sentence is 'properly put together' rather than whether it is meaningful, or silly, or bizarre"[5, 7]. How words are combined influences how a given sentence is interpreted. This implies that syntax is related to semantics, morphology and discourse analysis. With discourse analysis, it is quite clear that syntax interacts or relates with pragmatics too[8]. In fact, syntax is said to come before pragmatic9[8]. These four areas of linguistics interact meaningfully with one another. Although their interaction is complex and controversial, the reality is commonly affirmed and empirically obtainable. For example, syntax relates with morphology and discourse analysis in that 'sentences are built in accordance with the same patterns and procedures as words or texts are'[4].

Ethics and Research Ethics: Conceptual Analysis: Ethics majorly concerns regulation of the behaviour and conduct of humans, as it affects the overall well-being of the society in which they live[9]. Uduigwomen's conception of ethics points out the fact that there is a correlation between individual actions and society's well-being and interests[10]. Uduigwomen[10], like Bonhoeffer[10], holds that the well-being of the society depends largely on the right actions of its members. This shared position implicitly tells us the grave implications of ethical deviance, as largely obtained in the contemporary society. Essentially, research with its ethics is one viable means of attaining the well-being of society. Thus, the right actions of researchers and other concerned parties in research matter a lot. This reality tells volume of the necessity of research ethics. It follows that violating language rules in research amounts to ethical deviance in both research and language, which has grave implications for the well-being of society.

Etymologically, ethics is derived from the Greek word 'ethos,' meaning customs, norms, values, habits and accepted ways of behaviour for individuals and different communities[12, 10]. There are practices that are peculiar to the global research community, while some apply to continental, regional and area based research groups. The definition emphasises acceptability, which implies in our context that language use for research ought to be in acceptable ways in conformity with established language rules, which include syntactic rules. The reality that certain research practices and ways of language use are wrong, while others are correct is captured by Omoregbe's[13]. As he notes, morality is the base of ethics. This is in view of rightness of actions and deeds in all human activities that are guided by ethics[13]. Agbo[14] agrees with Omoregbe[13] on the relationship between ethics and morality on the ground that both ethics and morality are characterised by words such as right, wrong, good, bad, responsibility, and conscience, ought to obligation, duty, justice, injustice, etc. In the same vein, research ethics and language ethics interact or even correlate with each other. First, language is the instrument used for formulating, establishing, institutionalising and disseminating research ethics and all that concerns research. Second, language ethics is the base of research ethics. This is because language conventions and principles, within which syntactic rules situate, are not just taken cognisance of but also followed in constructing, implementing and disseminating research ethics.

Basic Research Ethics: Various principles constitute research ethics, meant to guide against wrong practices in research. Here, some of the core requisitions that form research ethics shall be highlighted. First, researchers have the ethical responsibility of minimising potential harm to participants[17]. It should be noted that participants include all sets of informants and respondents, including discussants, interviewees, informed and uninformed persons whose data constitute research primary data, and so on. Next, research ethics demands the involvement of participants with expertise and first-hand reliable knowledge of the subject matter of a given research[18, 19, 20]. Yet, their language skills are not considered, covered or demanded by statutory research ethics. Syntax wrongness is seen in faulty sentences, wrong arrangement of word classes in linguistic structures conveying the research communicated message(s) and other mechanical inaccuracies in research works. These include wrong spelling, punctuation, clumsy and incomplete sentences, violations of rules of grammatical concord whereby there is a mismatch between verbs and nouns. Research ethics also demands for a thorough assessment of risks and/or harm, so as to avoid harming participants[18.] Language syntax errors cause solecism, and impair the meanings of the message(s) encoded in a research work. Besides, when a researcher communicates the reverse of what is intended as a result of syntactic blunders, the blunders could cause one form of harm or the otherIt is emphasised that every researcher ought to compulsorily 'act ethically, regardless of whether you obtain ethics approval'[18]. Besides, it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure the maximum 'protection of the physical, social and psychological well-being of research participants, regardless of the type of approval procedure your research undergoes'[18]. This paper observes that the protection of participants and the ensuring of this and that all require language use. It is wrong to use language in ways that affect participants, as the misuse of language leads to the violation of overall research ethics. On the other hand, the violation of syntactic rules, among other language rules and guiding principles of usage, amounts to the overall violation of language ethics. It is often clearly stated that editing or proofreading a research work is the exclusive duty of the individual researcher or author. Unfortunately, most researchers do not take the editing of their work seriously. Some of them do so hastily at about or on the deadline for submission of a research work.

The Imperative of Syntactic Rules in Research Ethics: All human endeavours need and rely on language and research as well as its ethics is no exception. The place of language in all human endeavours have been emphasised by scholars[26-32, 3, 33-35]. For example, Uche[34]maintains that 'without language, science cannot strive; this shows that effective communication in science involves [the] ability to use and understand the technical terms as well as interpret information encoded in symbolic form into another non-symbolic form of language.' In the same vein, Dibie and Robert[30, 32] hold that the extent to which science could go in whatever it does and could offer depends on language. Herein, it follows that research of all kinds depends on language. Besides, it cannot strive without language, because language must be used in carrying out research, doing its analysis, and communicating its findings/results, discoveries and knowledge, among others. In all these, words are used systematically to construct sentences and describe all that concerns the research.

The systematic use of language for these purposes and for constructing and disseminating research ethics cannot be possible without syntax and syntactic rules. Also, leaning on the above observation by Uche[35], among others, this study further avers that effective communication in science and research requires efficient knowledge of language use, which includes learning, mastering and observing syntactic rules and other rules of the language in use for given scientific and research activities. And, to understand the technical terms and interpret information encoded in science, research and research ethics, effective language is imperative.

The above views tell volume of the place of language in research in general and research ethics in particular. Research thought, planning and processes, opinions, ideas, discoveries, inventions, innovations, changes, theories, observations, experiments, analyses, hypotheses, scientific principles/laws, etc. are all constructed, processed, expressed, performed and communicated using language. At least, a language (or in some cases, several languages) is (are) used for these. Research involves gathering and giving out information and directives, which cannot be possible without language. Language functions in these ways. Using language to achieve these and whatever purpose(s) requires yielding to the rules of the language in use, as every language is rule-governed[3]. Research ethics, as laid-down principles guiding research, get communicated to the heterogeneous audience of researchers and research bodies through language use. On the other hand, language use also follows certain laid-down principles of the specific language in relation to those of language in universal context (i.e. universal language rules). This study argues that syntactic rules are the top most of these language rules. But regrettably, syntactic rules are often relegated by researchers and research bodies, as they rather focus almost exclusively on research ethics that are not language-based rules.

Syntactic Rules and their Violation in Research: An Exposition: Nwala[3] notes, 'the linear arrangement of words, phrases, clauses and sentences are defined by the rules of the language' used by a researcher, like any other categories of language users. Since every language has its own rules, which make it distinctive and specific, a researcher ought to adhere to the rules of the specific language they use in their research work. Adhering to language rules requires adhering to syntactic rules too. In fact, the number one language rules to adhere to generally while using language are the syntactic (grammatical) rules. In the context of the subject matter of this study, syntax concerns itself with the correctness of research arranged words, phrases, clauses and sentences, which convey research activities and findings. Since research with its ethics involves language use, research ethics ideally begins with language ethics.

Considering the above, this study observes that it is quite regrettable that language ethics is most often than not neglected or not strictly followed. The negligence allows mistakes to become blunders and add up to extant blunders in both research works and established research ethics. The study also observes that in most cases, the focus is moved sharply from syntax to pragmatics and semantics, whereby those concerned emphasise meaning and context rather than syntactic principles and rules of correctness, grammaticality, conformity, wellness of form and acceptability. Strictly speaking, the negligence is almost the exclusive preserved linguistic act exhibited by the non-linguists, who are neither (very) familiar with language conventions, norms and rules nor worried by deviant language use (situation). To the linguist, especially the syntactician, correct combination and arrangement of words and morphemes, their syntactic relations and applicable rules and analysis must not be neglected. This study goes further to observe that there is no doubt that some language experts also have research works that violate syntactic rules and even other phases of violations of language rules (ethics). One major reason is rush and rash work done a few days to or on the deadlines of submissions of research works. Poor editing and personality or elitist pride are two other major reasons. It is to that end that this study blames researchers and research bodies that neglect language principles and rules, which are ideally the base of research ethics. It is also in view of the foregoing reality that this study engages in doing a critical exposition of syntactic rules within the confine of research ethics.

Over the years, various grammatical approaches have been evolved and used for describing the syntactic relations of morphemes, words and phrases in clauses and sentences and 'the rules of their concatenations and combinations'[3]. Immediate constituent grammar and generative grammar are of specific interest to this study, as far as syntactic rules and research ethics are concerned. These two approaches directly concern the conventional or traditional use of language with its syntax and syntactic rules for research and research ethics. Accordingly, Generative Grammar (GG) tries to discover rules and principles that determine the properties of languages[36]. GG emphasises the principles of competence, accuracy, clarity, correctness and performance (errors). Also, GG teaches how words and other larger linguistic units are generated along with the processes of generating them. The principles and rules for generating them are also examined and emphasised by GG. Next, the Immediate Constituent Grammar (ICG) teaches that words are not used arbitrarily in constructing meaningful linguistic structures, such as those in research works and statutory research ethics. The concatenations of words and larger structures ideally follow the rules of the language in use and the spatial relationship, which both define the linear sequence of the items, as they appear from left to right[33, 34, 37, 3].

Here, the concern is not on in-depth linguistic analysis of the constituents of sentences in research works and statutory research ethics. Rather, the focus is on the imperative of correct combination and arrangement of words, phrases, clauses and sentences in research works and ethics, based on syntactic rules along with other rules of the language in use. The rules of grammatical concord rest on the rules of the immediate constituent grammar. That is why a singular subject is expected to or must be matched with a singular verb. Except for verbs with static or unchanging forms, singular verbs take inflections (e.g. s, es, ies, etc.), while singular nouns, pronouns, gerunds and other nominals do not take such inflections. One cannot rightly say, 'The issues investigated is being approached scientifically.' That is because there is no grammatical match between the noun and the verb. The subject/noun— issues — is plural and cannot thereby go with the auxiliary verb 'is'. Rather, the right construction would read thus: 'The issues investigated are being approached scientifically.' This sentence obeys or follows the syntactic rule of concord match between subject and object (noun and verb) of a sentence.

Consider some other examples: 'Studies shows that...'; 'Research have shown that...'; 'The results/findings shows that ...'; 'This scholar alongside (along with or as well as) others state that...' etc. These constructions are faulty. Regrettably, linguistic structures, such as these and a lot more, are found in research works. These clearly exemplify the violation of syntactic rules. In this context, some rules of grammatical concord, which are integral parts of the whole syntactic rules, are violated. This current study maintains that there are various ways in which syntactic rules are violated by researchers and even research statutory bodies. These include wrong spellings, use of wrong tenses, faulty expressions, omission and wrong use of punctuations, mismatch of words (e.g. noun phrases and verb phrases in sentences), incomplete and jumbled sentences, using phrases and clauses for sentences, distorting structural correlation of words and other linguistic structures, misuse and omission of prepositions, wrong use of pronouns (e.g. pronouns without their antecedents), violation of paragraphing rules (e.g. no coherence and paragraph unity, wrong or no use of connectives, etc.), combination or concurrent use of two or more English varieties (British and American English), etc.

For this study, research work requires or allows for the use of complex and compound-complex sentences much more than simple and compound sentences. Regrettably, most reviewers and editors, especially those outside language fields, often lash researchers for using complex and compound-complex sentences. They simply tag such sentences as 'clumsy' or 'vague'. Some of them clearly state, 'Avoid use of long sentences; maintain simple sentences.' While a larger number of such reviewers and editors prefer or demand for simple sentences, others accept or also consider compound sentences but reject other higher forms of sentences according to structure. It should be noted that the foregoing points are the views and examples offered by this present study. The study further maintains that resorting to simple (and compound) sentences alone in research reports and essays is a case of violation of syntactic rules of sentences and their uses as regard sentences according to structures. This violation has to do with digressing from the syntactic convention and principle of sentence formation and use in advanced composition of research kind.

With the rise in research on syntax, championed by Noam Chomsky, an American linguist, three major aims of the analysis of sentence structure are to: 'reveal the hierarchy in the ordering of elements; explain how surface ambiguities come about; and demonstrate the relatedness of certain sentences'[6, 7,15]. Series of tools have been developed by different linguists to make visible the structure considered to lie behind sentences. The tools for sentence analysis vary among linguists, based on variances in the changing syntactic models of the different schools of syntax[15]. Similarly, Baker[5] notes that there are basic lessons to learn from syntactic research. First, syntactic research had made available in the literature different given discoveries in wholesome details. Second, syntax is a vast topic or sub-discipline of linguistics that delves into other levels of language studies and analyses. Third, constraints are central to syntax, which undoubtedly border on rules, principles and patterns of word combination into larger units and the correctness of their arrangement. Fourth, 'there is a large component of syntax that is common to all human languages,' which thus makes it to be both language universal and specific. The fourth point affirms the theory adopted for this study, which is the UG.

As such syntactic rules apply to all human languages and ought to be followed in all human endeavours including research. The overall implications of violating syntactic rules include:

(i) The meaning of given sentences are affected or blurred.
(ii) Solecism arises with its grave implications.
(iii) Word structures and other aspects of morphology are misrepresented and adversely affected.
(iv) Discourse analysis becomes ambiguous and complicated.
(v) The violation of syntactic rules transcend to the violation of some language rules.
(vii) And, in the context of this paper, the implication extends to the violation language-based research ethics. That is, the research ethics bordering on language is violated, when syntactic rules are violated by researchers and research bodies in research works and given statutory research ethics (documents).

Conclusion: This study decries the gross negligence of the breach of syntactic rules as well as other language rules guiding language use for research and research ethics. It shows that research with its ethics can only be possible with language use. The use of language is systematic and rule-governed. Syntactic rules are at the apex of language rules. Everything about research, science and all human endeavours involves and relies on language. Research ethics is made and disseminated with language. On the whole, the study shows the correlation between syntactic rules, as integral parts of the whole of language ethics, research ethics, and between syntax and several other levels of language analysis. The study submits that given the place of language in research as well as research ethics, the violation of syntactic rules in research work implies the violation of language rules, as applicable to the research language in use.

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