Inflections in English Nouns, Verbs, and Adjectives

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Abstract

The objectives of the study are to analyse inflections as they occur in the English language in nouns, verbs and adjectives, including both regular and irregular forms, in order to quantify how many types of variations there are and to determine what these variations are. The instrumentation of the study comprises of a content analysis of inflections in English that yields an 8-point framework of the inflection of nouns, verbs and adjectives: 1. plural nouns, 2. possessive nouns, 3. present verb third-person singulars, 4. present participle verbs, 5. past tense verbs, 6. past participle verbs, 7. comparative adjectives, and 8. superlative adjectives. Checklists were then derived from this framework and filled by data collection of lexical units from a variety of sources. The data obtained was then analysed with a focus on suffix morphemes. Useful findings include a complete inventory of inflectional variation and irregularities that reveal the true complexity of this grammatical component of the English language. Insights regarding these inflectional variations and irregularities are offered to encourage deeper understanding and improvement of English skills as a foreign language in Thailand for both teachers and serious students of English.

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Introduction

In recent years, inflection in a language is significant because it can convey information regarding tense, agreement, person, number or aspect, and other details. But, despite its significance, it is often omitted or incorrectly substituted. The omission of inflection could be expected in usage by second language (L2) learners or agrammatic users when exposed to a highly inflectional language with rich verbal paradigms, where multiple verb forms compete for the learner's or user's attention and overwhelm the processing system. English, with its residual inflectional paradigm, should not be as challenging (Szupica-Pyrzanowski, 2009).

Purpose of the Study

To achieve the goals of the study, the purposes of the study are to:
1. analyse inflection in nouns,
2. analyse inflection in verbs, and
3. analyse inflection in adjectives.

Significance of the Study

This research study of inflection in English nouns, verbs and adjectives is significant in terms of the pedagogy of developing the students' level of ability in linguistic competency, but research related to inflection in the study of foreign languages has rarely been conducted into the analysis of English language inflection in Thailand. In particular, when selecting foreign language programmes, universities often simply choose the programs and teaching methods that are popular in other Asian countries, or in the USA.

It is believed that this research study delivers rich and useful data, which will give a broader idea of the usage of inflection in the English language. Also, it will also be beneficial for educators, educational systems and international research as the findings can be advantageous to the educational system in neighbouring countries such as Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia where the cultural factors and languages are similar to Thailand. Understanding the system of inflection as used in the English language will further contribute to the improvement of educational development in the region of Southeast Asia and beyond.

Research Methodology

This research started with a content analysis of English inflection in nouns, verbs and adjectives, including both regular forms and irregular variations. Additonally, there was a collection of the data from a number of different dictionaries. Variations in inflection were analysed and summarised for each unique environment, in order to find how many types of exist variations in the English inflection of nouns, verbs, and adjectives, and what these variations are. Finally, the data was analysed.

Research Questions

To achieve the objectives, the research set out to answer the following key research questions:

1) What types, varieties and environments of inflection occur in English nouns.

2) What types, varieties and environments of inflection occur in English verbs.

3) What types, varieties and environments of inflection, occur in English adjectives.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation included three parts, namely 1) content analysis, 2) data collection and 3) data analysis. The details of the instrumentation are as follows:

1. Content Analysis

The first step of this research study was a content analysis of the environments of English inflection, which are classified by noun, verb and adjective inflection. For each type of inflection, both regular and irregular forms were surveyed. The focus of the analysis was on the irregular forms, in order to find all of the commonly accepted variations from the regular types and forms of inflection, namely those which are considered to be the exceptions to the rules.

The first step of the content analysis was the construction of the instrument. The instrument of content analysis was constructed from 8 categories of inflectional affixes for nouns, verbs and adjectives. These are the regular forms as listed below:

Nouns:
1. Plural –*s*
2. Possessives – *'s*

Verbs:
3. Third person SG non-past –*s*
4. Progressive -*ing*
5. Past tense –*ed*
6. Past particle -*en*/-*ed*

Adjectives:
7. Comparative –*er*
8. Superlative -*est*

The second step of the content analysis involved an examination of each type of inflection that is used in the English language in order to catalogue every possible environment. The examination began with the standard or regular processes and then went on to find all of the variations or irregular processes that occur in relation to each type. This analysis resulted in a thorough and complete view of the field of inflection in the English language and provided checklists for each category of English language inflection.

2. Data Collection

The second part of the instrumentation was to find all lexical occurrences for each type or environment and to classify them according to the process by which they are formed and to ascertain if that process is considered to be a regular or irregular variation. This step involved a survey of the vocabulary items involved with each variation or irregular occurrence, in order to find which words can be considered as irregular for that particular environment. The purpose of these first two steps was to collect data related to the research objective.

The research data was collected by the following methods using a lexical analysis. They can be classified as below:

1) For English inflection analysis, the data was collected by recording into the checklists provided, according to each variation. There was a collection of the data from a number of different dictionaries, such as the Oxford Advanced

Learner's Dictionary, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English and the Collins Cobuild Dictionary and Rhyming Dictionary.

2) The next step was sorting the cases, and putting the same variants together. The vocabulary chosen according to the following criteria:

a) nouns - they must have

plural forms, such as in inflectional environments, both at word level and compound level.

b) verbs - all verbs were included in the analysis.

c) adjectives - irregular forms were focused on.

Lexicons and parts of speech were considered while they were collected from the various dictionaries. Words with prefixes were eliminated and only the simplest form was chosen, for example, between *write* and *rewrite*, the word *write* was chosen.

Then, each type of environment and the suffixal occurrences were explained.

3) Finally, analysis of the phenomenon in each category in noun, verb and adjective inflection was conducted and conclusions were drawn from the data.

Results of this study

Findings related to noun inflection

Noun inflections occur in the following environments: 1) Nouns ending with –f, -fe, -ff, -ffe, -gh and –ph, 2) Nouns ending with –o, -oo, -oe, -ou -ow, and –eau, 3) Nouns ending with –y.-ay, -ey, -oy, and –uy, 4) Nouns ending with –th, 5) Nouns having suffixes –en and –ren, 6) Nouns with suffixes –ee, -e, and –i, 7) Nouns with a zero suffixal plural , 8) Nouns with Greek and Latin suffixes -a, -e, -es, –ces and –i, 9) Compound nouns with different forms of affixes, and 10) Nouns with multiple plural forms.

The pronunciation of suffix –s is affected by voiced, voiceless and sibilant phonemes of the final consonant and by final vowels sounds, all of which are voiced. Some of them are inflected within the word, such as in *man - men* and *woman - women*. A few of them are inflected by a zero suffixed plural with no change occurring either within or at the end of the word, such as *fish - fish*. Some nouns ending with –e will retain a silent –e when inflected for plural form, such as *note – notes*; while others will have the –e pronounced, such as *bridge - bridges*.

The suffixes that are added in noun plural inflections in English are as follows: -s, -es, -ves, -ies, -en, -ren, –ee, -e, and –i. There are also Greek and Latin suffixes -a, -e, -es, –ices and –i and a zero suffixed plural included.

This indicates that noun inflection for plural in English is not a simple process but one that requires a broad knowledge of numerous environments and irregular inflectional affixes. The options for noun plural inflection are much more complicated than simply adding –s to the end of a noun.

Inflection for noun possessives also has numerous variations for the use of –'s. These include: 1) Singular nouns with -'s, 2) Plural nouns without -s affix 3) Two owners with one thing 4) Noun phrases 5) Names of some places 6) Nouns telling time. 7) Nouns telling distance 8) Nouns telling monetary value 9) Nouns telling weight. For S apostrophe (-s'), they are: Plural nouns without -s affix, 3) Either –'s or –s' affixes: Specific nouns ending with –s. This category of inflection also includes possessive suffix-'s in plural of numbers: 1) Plural of letters, numbers or words 2) Plural of abbreviations and 3) Decades.

This also indicates that noun inflection in possessive form in English is also not a simple process, but one that requires a broad knowledge of the environments in which–'s and–s' can occur. According to Conway (1998), he discussed the problem of English plurals, claimed that even at the lexical level, it can be a complex matter to correctly inflect the individual words of a sentence to reflect their number, person, mood, case, etc. However, Wagner (2008), posed questions regarding teaching morphemes in a certain order, asking if it should be broadened to include other factors, for example, should teachers focus on the morphemes on which students make the most mistakes; should teachers focus on the most frequently used morphemes and disregard acquisition order altogether and should teachers focus less on grammatical morphemes and more on communicative ability.

The options for noun possessive inflection are more varied than simply adding –'s or –s' to the end of a noun.

Findings related to verb inflection

Inflection for verbs was also found to include a number of variations. While there are very few variations for 3rd-person non-past, and just five variations for the present participle, there are approximately 100 irregular verbs of different types for past tense and past participle forms, as well as other types of variation. This also indicates that inflection for verbs in English requires more consideration than simply adding the affixes –s, –ing, and –ed.

For present 3rd–person singular, verbs are formed by adding the affix –s for both regular and irregular verbs. In the case of verbs ending with a sibilant consonant, the suffix –es is added. Also, verbs that end with –y preceded by a consonant have the –y changed to –i- and then the suffix –es is added.

To form the present participle, the suffix –ing is added to all verbs. However, the spelling of the present participle varies slightly according to the specific environment. When the verb ends with –e, that –e is deleted and when the verb ends with a consonant preceded by a short vowel, that consonant must be doubled. A few verbs ending with –ie will have the –ie changed to –y and a few others ending with –c will have a –k added before the suffix –ing.

The suffix –ed is normally added to verbs in order to form them into both the past tense and past participle forms. This is considered the regular process for verbs in Modern English. Depending on the environment of the verb, a number of spelling variations can be found for these regular forms using the suffix -ed.

Verbs that are formed in ways other than through the use of the suffix –ed are considered to be irregular. Some of these verbs add suffixes –d or –t similar to regular past tense verb forms. Many others are formed through changes in the vowels of the verbs. Some of them have a zero suffix and do not change at all. While there are some general patterns for the irregular past tense forms, the number of variations is greatly varied and not easily predicted.

For the past participle forms, there are also various ways other than the affix –ed. These irregular forms have many variations. Although there are some general patterns, this aspect of inflection is also highly irregular and unpredictable. Also, some past participles have two accepted forms, regular and irregular.

Findings related to adjective inflection

Although inflection for adjectives is relatively more straightforward than both noun and verb inflection in the English language, it was also found to include two main variations and some spelling variations for comparative and superlative forms using –er and –est affixes.

For comparative and superlative forms, adjectives are formed by adding the suffixes –er and –est respectively. The rules of spelling for words ending with –e or a consonant preceded by a vowel are followed. If the adjective has two or more syllables, the comparative and superlatives forms are generally made by adding more or most before the adjective. Some two-syllable adjectives follow both of the two rules by either adding –er / -est at the end or using more or most before. Also, there are a small number of adjectives that do not follow either of these inflectional patterns and thus are considered to be irregular. It can be concluded that adjective inflection in English is also more complicated than following simple rules of grammar.

Conclusion

The main findings of the study showed that inflectional variation in the English language is significant, especially for plural noun inflection. Other types of inflection are also rather complicated. Thai students are not normally exposed to these variations, even when they study English outside of their regular school programs. Variations in inflection are not focused on during instruction and practice of its use then is minimal.

In addition, an inflectional language or the concept of a changing process is difficult for Thai students. They are not familiar with the different environment of inflected nouns, verbs and adjectives, because there is no inflection occurring in the Thai language: there is no plural form of nouns, varied verb form in present or past participle, or a comparative and superlative of the adjective form in the Thai language. As a result they suffer from interlanguage interference and their development of accuracy is negatively affected.

Furthermore, inflection and the various linguistics are interlinked, for example, the phenomenon at the phonological level is affected by English inflection, as in the sound change from a plural noun morpheme, possessive noun morpheme and a third person singular verb –s can be inflected to one of three possible phonemes /s/, /z/, and

/əz/. In addition, inflection at the syntax level, for example subject and verb agreement, is more complicated. Thus, English competency should be developed along with both communicative and linguistic competence in the learning process and the way that the various aspects of inflection are presented and taught in the classroom has to be reconsidered. Inflection should not be taught as separate from the other various elements, but they should all be taught in an integrated system at the beginner and elementary levels. In other words, inflection should be explained and taught in context during classroom activities when practising reading comprehension and speaking skills.

The implication of this correlation is that changes and adjustments to language teaching programs should be considered by schools and institutes. This language curriculum reform should focus on providing students with courses that emphasize inflection and inflectional variations and exceptions. Universities could also be encouraged to provide more activities and opportunities for using English for both communicative skills and linguistic competence, in order to improve students' second language acquisition in the future.

These findings regarding the complexity of noun, verb and adjective inflection usage in the English language are in line with the statement of Conway (1998); "The English language is overburdened with idiosyncratic grammatical features, a legacy of its eclectic accretion over 1500 years. One unfortunate consequence of this otherwise admirable richness is that automatically generating correct English is fraught with difficulty. Composing the simplest of sentences may require quite sophisticated semantic understanding to enable the correct syntax to be chosen."

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