



## LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF DANGLING MODIFIERS IN THE WRITTEN ESSAYS OF UNDERGRADUATES OF PRINCE ABUBAKAR AUDU UNIVERSITY, ANYIGBA

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### Abstract

The research examined the dangling modifiers in the written essays of undergraduates of Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba with a view to identifying modifiers that dangle in the written essays, their sources and their linguistic implications. The undergraduates' written essays were the major sources of data gathering for this research. The researchers sought the permission of the course lecturers through the Head of Department of Arts Education, Faculty of Education to assess students' examination scripts. The researchers randomly selected 42 scripts cutting across different levels with differently types of essay questions. The data obtained were analyzed using the descriptive tool. After the analysis, the research revealed identified prevailing dangling modifiers in students' written essays and attributed this error to lack of focus and issues with the syntax of the native language. In many languages, modifiers can be used in different ways than they are in English. The work equally showed that the most common sources of dangling modifiers are the use of passive voice, the use of a participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence and the use of pronoun ambiguity. It equally revealed that the most obvious linguistic implication of dangling modifiers is that it makes a sentence difficult to understand, creates ambiguity, or causes the reader to misinterpret the meaning of the sentence and can make a sentence sound awkward or ungrammatical. The work concluded that dangling modifiers are a common grammatical error that can make sentences confusing and awkward. With a combination of explicit instruction, practice, and feedback, students can be helped to improve their writing and produce clear, well-written essays.

### Introduction

The ability to think creatively and present it in a concise and understandable manner is the hallmark of all writers. This is where "thought" or psycho-linguistic process is seen as the principal means by which all essayists could naturally write what is needed for the readers to understand. In addition to "thought" is language which plays an important role in essay writing. The principal function of language is the transmission of information which underlines the



“thought”. To record the observation of things around us; actions of men, events, processes, incidents and a lot more, depends exactly on the flexibility and resourcefulness of the language which an essayist is able to handle. On the other hand, the extent to which the process of thought can miss-carry the essayist’s intention is predicated upon how the language is inadequately handled. What we hear, how we feel things happen to us, what we smell and what we taste are all first registered in the human mind (thought) before they are finally transmitted in a language that others will appreciate. This is the process of essay composition. According to Ogwu (2019), an essay is a kind of prose composition written with the aim to communicate particular information to a target audience. By its nature, it is written to narrate certain events that have taken place in the past or describe persons, places and situations in such a way that readers can have clear perceptions of things described. It could present point of view in a logical manner or expound and explain the process of a thing step-by-step as it happens in human life. This, in summary, gives an insight into the types of essays we have.

Considering the importance of writing compositions to students’ carriers, institutions of high learning in Nigeria have introduced composition writing to students at all levels to groom them with the task cognitive reasoning and the development of thought before they are finally transmitted in a language that others will appreciate. While other students have to offer this course as a university-based course, some do it from their first year to the final year. Reasons for this are not far-fetched. There are several reasons why undergraduate students are exposed to essay writing at various levels. Essay writing is a key skill for success in the university and beyond. Essay writing helps students to develop critical thinking and communication skills, which are essential for academic and career success. Additionally, writing essays gives students an opportunity to explore and express their own thoughts and ideas, which can help them to develop a sense of identity and self-awareness. Also, essay writing can be a fun and creative outlet, and it can help students to learn more about the world around them. In addition to the benefits listed above, essay writing is an important part of the undergraduate curriculum because it helps students to develop their research skills. When students research and write an essay, they learn how to find, evaluate, and use information from a variety of sources. They also learn how to organize their thoughts and ideas in a clear and concise manner.

Another strong reason why undergraduates are exposed to essay writing is because it prepares them for graduate-level work. Most graduate programs require students to write research papers, and essay writing helps students to develop the skills they need to succeed in these programs. Additionally, many undergraduate courses are structured around reading and writing assignments, which helps students to practice and improve their essay writing skills. Furthermore, writing essays for undergraduate courses helps students to become comfortable with the writing process, which is essential for success in graduate school and in future careers.

When students particularly undergraduates engage themselves in the act of writing as a prerequisite to pass a prescribed course, modifier error is one of the likely problems faced by



students in writing. Some studies strongly recommend that the most beneficial approach of facilitating learners' command of grammar in writing is to use learner's writing as the starting point for discussing grammatical concepts (Calkins, 2018; DiStefano & Killion, 2016; Harris, 2015 in Hanganu, 2015). Teachers are believed to be facilitators of grammar instruction that directs students in their efforts to recognize and correct errors in usage (Chin, 2000). The teacher who sees that many students are writing sentences containing misplaced modifiers can plan and teach lessons on the proper use of modifiers, using examples from students' writing. The teacher can instruct the students during the lessons to exchange their drafts with their peers for editing purposes.

A modifier describes, clarifies, or gives more detail about a concept. One of these modifier errors is called dangling modifier. Dangling modifier is a phrase or clause that modifies a word not clearly stated in the sentence, or that does not connect grammatically with what it is intended to modify. Examples of dangling modifiers according to Meyers (2004) can make the meaning of the sentence unclear, so they should be avoided. A dangling modifier occurs when the intended subject of the modifier is missing from the sentence, and instead, another subject appears in its place. Dangling modifiers often take the form of an introductory phrase that is connected to the wrong thing. Joseph (2018) sees dangling modifier is a word or phrase that modifies a word not clearly stated in the sentence. A dangling modifier is a phrase or clause that either modifies no word in the sentence or refers to the wrong word. Dangling modifiers cause the sentence to lack coherence.

Interestingly, these modifier errors are unconsciously made by students as they answer examination questions during their semester examinations. These errors according to research may have come from the structure of the language of students which provides opportunity for a comparative study, because learning to write fluently and expressively is the most difficult of the macro skills for all language users regardless of whether the language in question is a first, second or foreign language. Furthermore, producing a coherent, cohesive, well-organized piece of writing is a challenging task which is intensified by the fact that the rhetorical conventions of English texts such as the structure, organization, lexis, and written essay differ from those in other languages and particularly in Nigeria.

Based on the above, the research is focused on the identification of dangling modifiers in the written essays of undergraduates, trace the sources of these dangling modifiers and to examine the linguistic effect of dangling modifiers on the writing of students of Prince Abubakar Audu, University, Anyigba.

### **Dangling Modifiers: An Overview**

Dangling modifier is one of the most insidious and confusion-causing problems in the English language. A dangling modifier is a word or phrase that modifies a word not clearly stated in the sentence. A modifier describes, clarifies, or gives more detail about a concept (Carol, 2014). Modifiers are important elements of writing, describing and qualifying another word to craftily change its meaning. As such, they are often employed in many pieces of writing for stellar



results. Unfortunately, they are also misused in a huge way. A modifier must always have a word to modify. This fact seems almost too obvious to warrant discussion among academics. And yet we frequently see sentences similar in construction to this one: "Hearing a number of entertaining stories, our visit was thoroughly enjoyable". According to McArthur, (2019), a dangling modifier is a specific case of which is the dangling participle is an error in sentence structure whereby a grammatical modifier is associated with a word other than the one intended, or with no particular word at all. For example, a writer may have meant to modify the subject, but word order makes the modifier seem to modify an object instead. Such ambiguities can lead to unintentional humour or difficulty in understanding a sentence.

Dangling modifiers usually occur when a group of words (most often a verbal phrase) is not clearly connected to the word it modifies. When the modifier occurs at the beginning of the sentence, readers usually expect it to modify the subject of the sentence. When it does not logically do that, the modifier is said to dangle. A dangling modifier can change the intended meaning of the sentence dramatically, which makes readers have to slow down in order to make out the meaning. The dangling modifier also sometimes creates strange images in readers' minds (Azar, 2019).

Dangling modifiers are so called because they are modifiers (usually adjectives) that do not obviously and logically refer to a word or phrase in the sentence, or to a noun or pronoun in the form that it appears in the sentence (Al-Hamash and Abdulla, 2019). A typical example of a dangling modifier is illustrated in the sentence "Turning the corner, a handsome school building appeared" (Merriam Webster, 2019). The modifying clause Turning the corner is clearly supposed to describe the behaviour of the narrator (or other observer), but grammatically it appears to apply to nothing in particular, or to the school building. Similarly, in the sentence "At the age of eight, my family finally bought a dog", the modifier "At the age of eight" dangles in mid-air, attaching to no named person or thing.

### **Dangling Modifiers in the Written Essays of Undergraduates**

Written essay is one of the language components that has to be mastered by students at all levels of education. It is because written essay is a fundamental thing in language learning. Thornberry (2019) stated that written essay allows us to use language to define the world in terms of how things occur, when, and where. In part, written essay is the study of acceptable forms or constructions in a language.

Most students usually make mistakes in their writing. The written essay mistakes usually occur in a simple word or even in a complex sentence. As English Language Education students, Education/ English students are trained to teach written essay as a subject that matters and has to be mastered by them. Therefore, the way a teacher or lecturer teaches essay has a considerable role in students' achievement in written essay comprehension.

According to Weaver (2018), "teaching written essay in conjunction with writing is pedagogy of possibility that is positive, productive, and practical". Written essay determines the quality of writing and how competent the writer is. Through writing, a writer wants to emphasize ideas, thoughts, and feelings by using correct words and sentences. Many Nigerian university students



have problems in using correct written essay, spelling, and even various vocabulary to express their ideas in their writing. As English becomes their foreign language, they find some difficulties in constructing good sentences in a paragraph with the right use of written essay. Broughton (2003) states that one out of four main problems confronted by ESL students in writing is English written essay and lexis. As written essay is a fundamental for assessment, incorrect written essay will create confusion and misinterpretation. This is a fact that ESL students are facing these problems in producing good sentences and they also tend to make errors or mistakes in sentence construction.

One of the problems of constructing a good sentence is a misplacement of a modifier.

Dangling modifiers refers to any word in the sentence; sometimes the sentence can be ridiculous or confusing to anyone who reads it, because the ambiguous clause or phrase that refers to words it modifies. Jumaa (2013) states that modifiers are important element to read, define, and assess terms to alter their meaning. Meanwhile, Bovee (2016) states that dangling modifiers is a phrase or clause that has no connection to the subject of the sentence which creates confusion by placing modifiers close to the wrong nouns or verbs. Finally, the dangling modifier should be avoided because it can change the meaning of a sentence and make the reader confused about the doer of the sentence. For example, Mitchell, Baugh, and Kelly (2016) show a dangling sentence: "While eating a cookie, the phone rang." This sentence does not specify who is eating a cookie.

The reader may get confused because while eating a cookie phrase, there is the phone rang, the sentence suggests that the phone rang while eating a cookie. Therefore, the correct sentence should be "While he was eating a cookie, the phone rang". To correct this type of dangling modifier, we cannot simply move it to another position in a sentence; we should add or change words so that the sentence can make sense. As dangling modifiers commonly occur at the beginning of the sentence, with the infinitives and verbal group that follows a preposition, the participial phrase, and elliptical clause, based on what types of words they describe.

### **Theoretical Anchorage**

The theory that is most commonly used to address dangling modifiers is the theory of sentence structure. Sentence structure refers to the way words in a sentence are arranged and connected. Dangling modifiers are a type of sentence structure error, in which the modifying phrase is not properly connected to the main part of the sentence. By understanding the theory of sentence structure, students can learn to identify and correct dangling modifiers in their own writing. Additionally, understanding sentence structure can help students to improve their overall writing skills, not just their ability to fix dangling modifiers. The theory of sentence structure was first proposed by linguist Noam Chomsky in his 1957 book, *Syntactic Structures*. Chomsky's theory laid the groundwork for modern linguistics, and his ideas about sentence structure are still widely used and taught today, as it provides students with a framework for understanding and improving their writing.

According to the proponent, the theory of the structure and information of sentences is further divided into three fundamental relations: the ordered entry of words into the making of a sentence; inequalities of likelihood of occurrence of a particular entry word in a sentence in





respect to the choices of words entering immediately before and the reduction in shape of certain words which have, upon their entry into a particular sentence, exceptionally high likelihood of occurrence, i.e. low amount of information. The first two relations determine the structure of a base subset of sentences which have a transparent grammatical structure, and contain little or no grammatical restrictions, and carry all the substantive information carried in any sentence of the language. The last relation is in general optional, and does not materially change the information in a sentence. It introduces a secondary grammatical complexity into sentences, and introduces restrictions, subsets, and grammatical rules into the language. From the base sentences all the remaining sentences of the language can be obtained by a direct application of the stated set of reductions, in a manner suitable to the constructing and, with certain short-cuts, to analyzing of sentences.

### Methodology

Undergraduates' written essays were the major sources of data gathering for this research. The researchers sought the permission of the course lecturers through the Head of Department of Arts Education, Faculty of Education to assess the students' examination scripts. The researchers randomly selected 42 scripts cutting across different levels with types of essay questions. The data obtained were analysed using descriptive tool with a view to identifying the dangling modifiers in the written essays of students, critically evaluate the sources of these dangling errors and accordingly show their linguistic effect.

### Date Presentation and Analysis

A dangling modifier is a grammatical error that occurs when a modifying phrase is placed too far away from the word or phrase that it is supposed to modify which can lead to confusion or ambiguity in a sentence.

### Identification of Dangling Modifiers in the Written Essays of Undergraduates

S/N	SENTENCE	DANGLING MODIFIER
1	While running late, the girl's launch bag was left at home.	It is not clear who is running late?
2	While ridding the motorcycle to the office, the bike broke down.	It is not clear who ridding the motorcycle.
3	Sleeping peacefully, the alarm clock went off.	It is not clear who is sleeping?
4	Arriving home late, the door was locked.	Who or what is arriving home late?
5	Walking down the street, the dog barked.	Who or what is walking down the street?
6	"Walking down the street, the man was seen	Who or what is walking down the street?
7	After eating dinner, the dishes were washed	Who or what is eating dinner?



8	Driving to work, the car broke down.	It is not clear who is driving the car.
9	While running late, the girl's backpack was left at home.	It is not clear who is running late.
10	Sleeping peacefully, the alarm clock went off.	It is not clear who is sleeping peacefully
11	Arriving home late, the door was locked.	Who or what is arriving home late
12	Walking down the street, the dog barked.	Who or what is walking down the street
13	After eating dinner, the dishes were washed.	Who or what is eating dinner
14	Running for office, the politician's campaign was well-funded.	It is not clear who is running for office.
15	While playing soccer, the player's knee was injured.	It is not clear who is playing soccer.
16	Arriving home from work, the house was dark.	It is not clear who is playing soccer.
17	Dropping from the bike, the lecturer came	It is not clear who is dropping from the bike
18	Finishing the dinner, the lady arrived.	It is not clear who is finishing the dinner.
19	Closing the eyes, the story changed.	It is not clear who is closing his eyes
20	Finishing the examination, the monitoring team of the university came.	It is not clear who is finishing the examination.

**Dangling modifiers in the Undergraduates Written Essays and the correct way to fix them:**

	While working in the kitchen, the oven exploded."	While I was working in the kitchen, the oven exploded
	Eating dinner, the doorbell rang	While I was eating dinner, the doorbell rang."
	Waiting for the bus, the time dragged on	As I was waiting for the bus, time



		seemed to drag on.
	Walking through the park, a bird flew overhead	While I was walking through the park, a bird flew overhead
	After taking a shower, the bathroom floor was wet	After I took a shower, I noticed that the bathroom floor was wet
	Driving through the city, the traffic was heavy.	As I was driving through the city, I encountered heavy traffic
	While watching television, the phone rang	While I was watching television, the phone rang.

### Discussion

Conventionally, modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses that add information to a sentence. They can be used to describe or clarify the meaning of other words in the sentence. Adjectives, adverbs, and prepositional phrases are all examples of modifiers. Modifiers can help to make sentences more specific and clearer, but they can also be a source of confusion if they are not used correctly as shown above. The primary role of modifiers is to provide additional information about the subject or object of a sentence. They can be used to describe qualities, quantities, or other aspects of the subject or object. Modifiers can also be used to indicate the time, place, or manner in which an action is performed. In addition, modifiers can be used to compare or contrast two or more things. All of these functions help to add clarity and specificity to a sentence.

In each of the examples above, it is clear that the modifier dangles in the air and not appropriately placed before the word it modifies, the modifying phrase "*driving to work*," "*running late*," "*sleeping peacefully*," "*riding the motorcycle*," "*walking down the street*," "*eating dinner*," "*Driving the car*," "*Running late*," "*sleeping peacefully*," "*arriving home late*," "*running for office*," "*playing soccer*," "*playing soccer*," "*dropping from the bike*," "*finishing the dinner*," "*closing his eyes*," "*finishing the examination*" is not placed close enough to the word or phrase it is supposed to modify. From the data presented, some examples are more complicated because they contain multiple clauses. However, the same principle applies: the modifying phrase must be placed next to the word or phrase that it is modifying.

One obvious common reason for dangling modifier errors in the undergraduates written essays of Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba is a lack of focus on the topic sentence or main idea of the paragraph. When students are trying to write a paragraph, they may start with a clear topic sentence, but then their focus may drift away from it as they continue to write. As a result, the modifiers they use may not be related to the main idea of the paragraph. By staying focused on the topic sentence, students can avoid making dangling modifier errors. It is also important to consider the level of the students' English language skills.





For students who are not native English speakers, dangling modifier errors may be a result of issues with the syntax of their native language. In many languages, modifiers can be used in different ways than they are in English. For example, in Igala language, adjectives can come after the noun they modify, instead of before it. This can lead to confusion and dangling modifier errors when writing in English. By understanding how modifiers are used in both English and the student's native language, they can avoid these errors.

Sure thing! One way to avoid dangling modifiers is to check each sentence to make sure that the modifying phrase is right next to the word or phrase it is modifying. Additionally, it can be helpful to ask yourself if the sentence makes sense if you remove the modifying phrase. If it does not, then you may have a dangling modifier. Another tip is to use a clear and simple sentence structure. By avoiding complex sentences and using shorter, simpler sentences, you can make it easier to identify and correct dangling modifiers.

There are several common sources of dangling modifiers in written essays. The most common source is the use of passive voice. In passive voice, the subject of the sentence is not performing the action, but is instead being acted upon. This can lead to confusion about who or what the modifier is describing. For example: *"The book was read by John."* *"John read the book."*

In this example, the subject ("the book") is being acted upon by the verb ("was read"), which is confusing. Another common source of dangling modifiers is the use of pronoun ambiguity. This occurs when the pronoun in a sentence is unclear about what or who it refers to. For example: *"The neighbor saw them when they were walking their dog."* *"The neighbor saw the couple when they were walking their dog."*

In this example, the pronoun "their" is ambiguous - it could refer to either the neighbors or the dog. By replacing the pronoun with a more specific noun, the sentence becomes clear. Another source of dangling modifiers is the use of a participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence. A participial phrase is a phrase that begins with a present or past participle, such as "running" or "shaking." If the phrase is not clearly related to the subject of the sentence, it can be confusing. For example: *"Running across the field, the ball was caught."* *"As the ball was running across the field, it was caught."* In this example, the participial phrase "running across the field" is not related to the subject ("the ball"). Another common source of dangling modifiers is a misplaced modifying phrase. This occurs when the modifying phrase is placed too far away from the word or phrase it is meant to modify. For example: *"After running in the rain, the girl was cold."* *"The girl was cold after running in the rain."* In this example, the modifying phrase "after running in the rain" is not next to the word it is modifying ("the girl"), so it is unclear whether the girl or the rain is cold.

The use of dangling modifiers can have several linguistic effects. The most obvious effect is that it can make a sentence difficult to understand. It can also create ambiguity, or cause the reader to misinterpret the meaning of the sentence. Additionally, dangling modifiers can make a sentence



sound awkward or ungrammatical. For these reasons, it is important to avoid dangling modifiers when writing. Dangling modifiers can also have stylistic effects on a piece of writing, because they can make a sentence sound informal or conversational. They can also create a sense of suspense or surprise. Additionally, they can add a playful or humorous tone to a piece of writing. In some cases, dangling modifiers can even be used as a literary device to create a specific effect. For example, they can be used to create a feeling of uncertainty or confusion.

## Conclusion

Dangling modifiers are a common grammatical error that can make sentences confusing and awkward. However, there are several ways that we can help undergraduates avoid using them in their writing. With a combination of explicit instruction, practice, and feedback, we can help students to improve their writing and produce clear, well-written essays. By avoiding dangling modifiers, students can communicate their ideas more effectively and become stronger writers overall.

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