



Investigating the Impact of Prepositional Errors on the Sudanese University Translation Students' Performance (English – Arabic)

Mohamed El-Bashir Mohamed Ahmed

University of the Holy Quran and Islamic Sciences, Omdurman, Sudan.

Abstract :

As a matter of fact, translation university students wherever and whenever they are do necessarily need to master the systems of both the source language and the target language when they translate texts. Lack of such mastery will surely lead to poor performance. They are expected to make errors if they do not master these two systems. This paper aimed at investigating the impact of prepositional errors on Sudanese university translation students' performance using English and Arabic languages. The researchers used two tools to achieve the purpose of this paper. Firstly, the targeted students were tested and many prepositional errors in their works were found, described and analyzed. Then they designed a questionnaire to be filled by a number of Sudanese university translation teachers in Khartoum, Sudan. In the course of this paper, some reviews of the related interest from some parts of the world were surveyed to make use of them and to support the researchers' hypothesis. It was found out that some differences between English and Arabic prepositional systems cause difficulties that drive such students to make errors. At the end of the paper, the researchers presented some recommendations as an attempt to overcome such errors. For example, mother tongue prepositional system must be kept aside when translating into English language.

Key words : *numerical difference, difficulty, unpredictability, polysemous*

المستخلص:

إن طلاب الترجمة الجامعيين أينما حلوا وحيثما كانوا يحتاجون، في الواقع، لإجادة أنظمة اللغة المنقول منها والمنقول إليها عندما يترجمون نصوصا. فانعدام مثل هذه الإجابة أو نقصانها سيقود بالتأكيد لأداء ضعيف. إذ من المتوقع اقترافهم الأخطاء حال عدم إتقانهم لهذين النظامين. هدفت هذه الورقة لتقصي أثر أخطاء حروف الجر على أداء طلاب الترجمة في الجامعات السودانية باستخدام اللغتين الإنجليزية والعربية. استخدم الباحثان وسيلتين للوصول لهدف الورقة. فالطلاب المستهدفون قد تم اختبارهم والعديد من أخطاء حروف الجر تم اكتشافها وتوصيفها وتحليلها. ثم صمم الباحثان استبانة لملئها بواسطة عدد من أساتذة الترجمة في الجامعات السودانية بالخرطوم - السودان. وبين ثنايا هذه الورقة، استعرضت بعض الدراسات العالمية ذات الصلة للاستفادة منها ولتدعيم ما افترضه الباحثان. وقد وجد أن هناك بعض الاختلافات بين أنظمة حروف الجر في اللغتين الإنجليزية والعربية تسبب صعوبات تقود مثل هؤلاء الطلاب لارتكاب الأخطاء. ثم في نهاية الورقة، قدم الباحثان بعض التوصيات في محاولة منهما للتغلب على مثل هذه الأخطاء. فعلى سبيل المثال، يجب ترك نظام حروف الجر في اللغة الأم جانبا عند الترجمة إلى اللغة الإنجليزية.

1. Introduction

A preposition according to Hornby, A. S. (1995) is a word or group of words used before a noun or a pronoun to show place, position, time, etc.

For example, *to, out of, on behalf of* are some of these prepositions. Prepositions can sometimes be followed by verbs. In English, more than



sixty words can be used as prepositions. However, Ibn Malik, J. M. (n.d.) mentioned only twenty words as Arabic prepositions (e. g. *min* (for *from*), *ila* (for *to*), and *hatta* (for *until*)). This great numerical difference between prepositions in these two languages may cause difficulties if they are needed to be translated from and into these languages. That is because the function of these prepositions is to connect a noun or pronoun to another word in a sentence. So the translated meaning of this connection can be misunderstood if an incorrect preposition is chosen. This paper intends to overshadow these prepositions and errors they cause when they are misunderstood.

2. Significance of the Study

The present paper is significant because it touches this area of study. It aims to investigate the impact of prepositional errors on the Sudanese university translation students' performance using English and Arabic languages. The researchers hypothesized that these students face some difficulties that cause them to make such errors. So the paper identifies at the common prepositional difficulties that the Sudanese translation students face when translating Arabic texts into English and vice versa and whether they can be overcome or not.

This study is also beneficial to the university translation lecturers because it tries to facilitate teaching prepositions in both English and Arabic languages. It is also significant for the university translation syllabus designers so as to prescribe appropriate translation curricula paying more attention to the way of how prepositions in these two languages can be taught in order to have good translation free of, at least, prepositional errors.

This study may also be of great benefit to other people in other Sudanese institutions who are concerned with teaching of English language

and translation in particular. It may also help researchers of English and Arabic languages in general because it highlights very important areas of these two means of communication. Hopefully, it is expected to provide a real addition in the applied linguistics field.

3. Objectives of the study

This study aims at:

1. Identifying the common prepositional difficulties that the students of the National Ribat University face when translating Arabic sentences into English and vice versa.
2. Highlighting some differences between English and Arabic prepositional systems.
3. Finding suitable solutions for these difficulties in order to help university translation students, lecturers, syllabus makers and all people who are interested in translation to overcome such difficulties.

4. Literature Review

Actually, numerous studies can be seen regarding the difficulties of the prepositions particularly when they are translated from one language into another. English has a number of prepositions higher than most other languages. Even European students, who are supposed to exist in the same English linguistic area, suffer from this prepositional problem.

The same numerical problem was emphasized by Lorincz, K. and Gordon, R (2012). They described such prepositional problem with "notoriety" as it seems complicated to master adding that prepositions in English are polysemous because most of them have a variety of meanings depending on context. This thing makes students frustrated to understand and choose the prepositions appropriately. Moreover, they mentioned alternative strategies for teaching prepositions instead of the traditional ones.



From these alternative approaches for overcoming difficulties in learning prepositions, "chunks," or words that often occur together can be used instead. For example, students can be taught the phrasal verbs *to rely on*, *to walk on*, or *to work on*, etc.

Khalil, A. (1985), Khanji, R. (1979), Schwabe, G. T. (1981), Scott, M. and Tucker, G. R. (1974), Tahir, M. (1987), and Zughoul, M. R. (1979) according to a study for Hamdallah, R. and Tushyeh, H. (1993) all attest to the inherent difficulty and unpredictability of English prepositions. The study presented some sources of this difficulty saying that Arab students tend to use the Arabic preposition instead of the English one stating that two thirds of errors in prepositions seemed to be attributed to native-language interference. These Arab students are not familiar with the English prepositions and their meanings. The study also supported the number of meanings each preposition has. It also attributed the difficulty to the traditional methods of teaching such as the grammar-translation method. Moreover, the study included some pedagogical implications to help Arab students in mastering English prepositions. They mainly focused on the differences between English and Arabic prepositions such as:

1. Arabic prepositions can be separable and inseparable whereas English prepositions are always separable.
 2. English prepositions consist either of one word alone or more, whereas Arabic prepositions mostly consist of one word.
 3. English prepositions are relatively various while Arabic prepositions are relatively limited.
- According to Thomson, A. J. and Martinet, A. V. (1980), students have two main problems with prepositions. These problems are that students may be confused whether in a certain construction a preposition is required or not and

which preposition is to be used when one is required. The same challenge that is faced even by English native speakers was also expressed by Gass, S. (1983).

Alayesh, M. A. (2012) carried out a study investigating the effect of Arabic prepositions on the use of English prepositions. Based on his experience as a teacher of English, he stated his points using some English prepositions. He found out that Arab students know only the common meanings of the English prepositions which are more popular and known than the other meanings. Students are also seemed to resort more often to colloquial Arabic more than the standard Arabic in choosing English prepositions.

This mother tongue interference as well as the carelessness of the students were also studied by Ibrahim. O. Y. (2017). Ibrahim's study revealed that the students were not equipped with appropriate knowledge and background about prepositions usage. The study also added that teaching prepositions is not an easy task suggesting appropriate training for teachers.

Al-Sohbani, Y. and Muthanna, A. (2013) coincided with the same viewpoint of challenge. They investigated the current major challenges of Arabic-English translation and vice versa. They designed a questionnaire for fourth year English language students at Ibb University as well as some university teachers of the same language. There were various statements about English language in that questionnaire. It is worth mentioning that prepositions challenge statement got the highest percentage (95%) of the respondents' answers in the section that was related to inadequate knowledge and practice of grammar. The statement said that "*translating prepositions is confusing*".

The same point was strengthened by Al-Yaari, S. A. (2013) who focused on the prepositions of



time *at*, *in* and *on*. He tested his university EFL students through ten English sentences containing these three prepositions to be translated into Arabic. He found out that the students were not able to translate these time prepositions properly from English into Arabic. He recommended Arab universities to establish new programmes that help EFL students become creative and professional translators.

Accordingly, some differences between English and Arabic prepositional systems are seemed to be behind such difficulties that drive Sudanese university translation students to make prepositional errors. So the previous studies supported the researchers' hypothesis.

5. Materials and Methods

The researcher in the present paper adopted a mixture of the descriptive and analytical methods to achieve the purposes of the study. A comparison and contrast between English and Arabic pronominal systems showed to what extent the Sudanese university translation students face difficulties when using these two languages. Two tools were used to collect data. A diagnostic test was conducted for collecting such data. This test which was carried out in April 2017 contained some questions. These questions included sentences in both English and Arabic languages to be translated by the targeted students into these two languages. The researcher also used a questionnaire for the same purpose. 30 university translation teachers in Khartoum participated filling in this questionnaire. Likert – 5 point scale: (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree) was adopted in it.

The study sample of the paper was the third year translation students (with total of 113

students) at the National Ribat University in Khartoum, Sudan. The whole number was taken to conduct the test. 25 subjects were dropped because they were absent for bad weather conditions and some other reasons. Another female student had a sudden illness and left the test room. Thus the final number of the sample was 87 students. The 87 students sat for a translation test of two different versions: English-Arabic translation test (for 41 students) and Arabic-English translation test (for 46 students). They were all Sudanese whose native language was Arabic. These students were already divided in their semi-final year into two majoring groups:

- English – Arabic translation students who were going to be specialized in English – Arabic translation.
- Arabic - English translation students who were going to be specialized in Arabic – English translation.

The researchers intended to display and discuss the results of collected data to prove whether the hypothesis is true or not. The Statistical Package for Social Studies (SPSS) was the software programme that was used for this purpose.

6. Results and Discussion

Each group of the targeted students was given a separate test containing paragraphs and individual sentences to be translated into the targeted languages. The following tables show the required results. The first four tables (1-4) show the students' results in the tests containing all types of errors (prepositional errors were included). However, the remaining tables focus on the prepositional errors in particular.



Table 1

Distribution of frequencies and percentages of the English –Arabic translation students’ results

Grade	Frequencies	Percentage
Pass	31	75.6%
Failure	10	24.4%
Total	41	100%

As shown in table (1) above, the frequencies and percentages of pass grade are higher than that of failure.

Table 2

Demonstrating the one sample t. test among the students’ marks in the English-Arabic translation test

Students’ marks %	Mean	STD	T.test value	DF	Sig.
	56.634	11.0922	32.69	40	0.00

The results in table (2) show that there is a significant difference between the mean of students’ marks and the T.test value at the significant value (0.00) which is less than 0.05.

Table 3

Distribution of frequencies and percentages of the Arabic-English translation students’ results

Grade	Frequencies	Percentage
Pass	12	26.8%
Failure	34	73.2%
Total	46	100%

As shown in table (3), which illustrates the frequencies and percentages of pass and failure grades, the failure grade in Arabic-English translation test is higher than the pass.

Table 4

Demonstrating the one sample t. test among the students’ marks in the Arabic-English translation test

Students’ marks %	Mean	STD	T.test value	DF	Sig.
	43.4130	14.6539	20.093	45	0.00

The results in table (4) show that there is a significant difference between the mean of students’ marks in the Arabic-English translation test and the T.test value at the significant value (0.00) which is less than 0.05. It was noticed that the mean of marks

in the English-Arabic translation test was greater than the mean of the Arabic-English translation test. It means that English-Arabic translation students were better than Arabic-English translation ones.

Table 5

Distribution of frequencies and percentages of number of prepositional errors in English and Arabic translation tests

Prepositions	Frequencies	Percentages
English-Arabic translation test	11	7.38%
Arabic-translation test English	138	92.62%
Total	149	100%



Results in table (5) above show the frequencies and percentages of the prepositions both in English and Arabic. These frequencies and percentages appear at high rates in Arabic-English translation test. It means that students were restricted to choose from a small number of Arabic prepositions. However, the position is quite different in the English prepositions.

Table 6

Having no clear rule for English prepositions makes them difficult to be translated into Arabic.

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	11	36.7%
Agree	13	43.3%
Neutral	3	10.0%
Disagree	3	10.0%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Total	30	100.0%

Results in table 6 above show the respondents' points of view. They indicate high percentages in "agree and strongly agree" options representing "(43.3%) and (36.7%)" respectively with the total (80%). So these high percentages reflect a positive trend for the statement and all

Table 7

Mother tongue grammatical interference affects negatively in translation for Sudanese university translation students.

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	13	43.3%
Agree	15	50.0%
Neutral	2	6.7%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Total	30	100.0%

Table 7 above also shows the respondents' points of view. They indicate high percentages in "Agree and strongly agree" options representing "(50%) and (43.3%)" respectively with the total (93.3%). So these

Students were confused to choose the appropriate equivalent prepositions for the Arabic ones.

As for the questionnaire, it also contained several grammatical statements. Only prepositions were highlighted in this respect. Tables 6 and 7 below show the results.

answers are agreeable. Therefore, this statement was successfully achieved.

Since the mother tongue interference also drives Sudanese university translation students to make prepositional errors in their performance, the respondents were asked to answer the following statement as shown in table 7 below.

high percentages also reflect a positive trend for the statement and all answers are agreeable. Therefore, this statement was successfully achieved.

7. Findings



The present paper found out that:

1. Sudanese university translation students make prepositional errors in translation from English into Arabic and vice versa due to some prepositional difficulties in these two languages.
2. Mother tongue prepositional interference affects negatively in translation for Sudanese university translation students.
3. It was noticed that English prepositional system is more confusing than the Arabic one.
4. Such prepositional errors affect negatively in translation from English into Arabic and vice versa.
5. Misunderstanding of some areas in these languages' prepositional systems overshadows the translation performance.
6. Having no real exposure to both English and Arabic prepositional systems and practice of translation leads to poor performance.
7. Designing translation syllabuses for Sudanese university translation students without considering their real needs causes fatal results.
8. Unqualified university language and translation teachers will never solve the problem.

8. Recommendations

In the light of the findings, the followings recommendations are suggested.

1. Sudanese university translation students badly need to be helped mastering English and Arabic prepositions as an attempt to avoid facing difficulties when they translate them from and into these two languages.
2. Mother tongue should be kept aside when translating prepositions from English into Arabic and vice versa.
3. Syllabus designers, coordinating with Sudanese university translation and language teachers, should consider the real needs of the Sudanese university translation students.

4. Intensive exposure to contrastive review between English and Arabic will be of great value.
5. Encouraging both creative university translation teachers and students is a must.
6. Sudanese university translation and language teachers should frequently be trained and provided with updated techniques of teaching prepositions.
7. Refreshing lectures in basic prepositional areas of both English and Arabic languages have to be done.

Summary of the Paper

The present paper aimed at investigating the impact of prepositional errors on the Sudanese university translation students' performance using English and Arabic languages. It shed lights to the commonest differences between English and Arabic prepositional systems and how such differences affect Sudanese university translation students' performance. Two tools were used to achieve the purpose of the paper. Data obtained from these tools showed that Sudanese university translation students made a lot of prepositional errors on which the paper focused. It was found out that English prepositional system is more confusing than that of Arabic for some reasons mentioned in the course of the paper. This confusion had a bad impact on translation of the targeted students. Some other findings were also considered. However, many suggestions were given to help avoid making such errors.

References

Alayesh, M. A. (2012). *The Effect of Arabic Prepositions on the Use of English Prepositions*. Arab 7th Conference on: Managing Knowledge and Intellectual Capital in Higher Education Institutions in Egypt and Arab World. Mansoura University. Mansoura. Egypt.



Al-Sohbani, Y. and Muthanna, A. (2013). *Challenges of Arabic-English Translation: The Need for Re-Systematic Curriculum and Methodology Reforms in Yemen*. Academic Research International. Vol. 4. No. 4 July 2013. At:

[http://www.savap.org.pk/journals/ARInt./Vol.4\(4\)/2013\(4.4-47\).pdf](http://www.savap.org.pk/journals/ARInt./Vol.4(4)/2013(4.4-47).pdf). 18.9.2017

Al-Yaari, S. A. (2013). *The Problem of Translating the Prepositions at, in and on into Arabic: An Applied Linguistic Approach*. Journal for the Study of English Linguistics. 2013, Vol. 1, No. 2. At: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314420652>. 18.9.2017.

Gass, S. and Selinker, L. (1983). *Language Transfer in Language Learning*. MA: Newbury House Publishers, Inc. page 161. At: <http://mcd.org.ilsitewp-content/uploads/2014/10/The-Use-of-Prepositions-in-English-Among-Arab-Students>. 21.9.2017

Hamdallah, R. and Tushyeh H. (1993). *A Contrastive Analysis of Selected English and Arabic Prepositions with Pedagogical Implications*. An-Najah National University. Nablus. Palestine

Hornby, A. S. (1995). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Oxford University Press. Oxford. UK.

Ibn Malik, J. M (n. d). *Alfiyat Ibn Malik*. Mohamed Ali Baidoun Publications. Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiya. Beirut. Lebanon.

Ibrahim. O. Y. (2017). *Writing Difficulties in Prepositions of Place Encountered by Albaha*

University Students at Preparatory Year Program. International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL) Volume 5, Issue 5, May 2017, PP 1-8. At: www.arcjournals.org. 21.9.2017.

Khalil, A. (1985). *Interlingual and Interlingual Errors in Arab Freshman English*. Bethlehem University Journal 4, 8-13.

Khanji, R. (1979). *Error Analysis of Arab Students*. Unpublished paper. State University of New York, College at Fredonia. New York.

Lorincz, K. and Gordon, Rebekah (2012) *Difficulties in Learning Prepositions and Possible Solutions*". Linguistic Portfolios: Vol.1, Article 14. At:

http://repository.stcloudstate.edu/stcloud_ling/vol1/iss1/14. 21.9.2017

Schwabe, G. T. (1981). *Oral Differences in English and Arabic*. A view from the ESL teacher perspective. ERIC Document ED 210918.

Scott, M. & Tucker, G. R. (1974). *Error Analysis and English – Language Strategies of Arab Students*. Language Learning 24, 69-97.

Tahir, M. (1987). *A Contrastive Analysis of Some Syntactic Features in English and Arabic*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Indiana at Bloomington. Indiana.

Thomson, A. J. and Martinet, A. V. (1980). *A Practical English Grammar*. Third edition. ELBS. Oxford University Press. Oxford. UK.

Zughoul, M. R. (1979). *Teaching English Prepositions*. English Teaching Forum 17, 24-29