

A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF SELECTED ENGLISH AND ARABIC PREPOSITIONS WITH PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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I. Introduction

English and Arabic belong to two different language families. While Arabic is a member of the Semitic language family, English belongs to the Indo-European language family. Consequently, it is not surprising that Arab students of English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) encounter difficulty in learning English in general.

Within English structures, prepositions constitute a learning difficulty as attested in the following quotations: "Among those who teach or learn the English language, prepositions have earned a reputation for difficulty if not downright unpredictability." (Pittman, 1966), "As any English teacher well knows, our prepositions are a particularly troublesome lot to the nonnative speaker of English." (McCarthy, 1972). English prepositions are a major problem for Arab EFL learners because they are fewer in Arabic and usage differs.

This paper presents a brief illustration and classification of selected English and Arabic prepositions. The general characteristics of selected English and Arabic prepositions are delineated. The types of English and Arabic prepositions are also discussed with emphasis on the simple and complex prepositions in English on the one hand and the separable and inseparable prepositions in Arabic on the other hand.

The sources of difficulty and linguistic problems faced by Arab EFL students in learning the English prepositions are also discussed. The types of errors involving English prepositions made by these learners are briefly discussed and illustrated. These types include prepositions omission, preposition substitution, and the redundant use of English prepositions. The paper concludes by offering some pedagogical implications and insights in teaching English to Arab EFL learners.

II. Illustration and Classification of English and Arabic Prepositions:

Prepositions are function words that link words, phrases, or clauses to other words in the sentence. They are not inflected, expressing such ideas as location, destinations, direction of motion, time, manner, and so on.

The following is an illustration of some English and Arabic prepositions with examples:

- (1) To /ʔila/
I went to Amman
/ðahabtu ʔila 9amman/
- (2) With /ma9/
With the girl
/ma9a lbinti/
- (3) For /li/
For them
/lahum/
- (4) From /min/
From him
/minhu/
- (5) At (exists only in English)
I am at home
/ʔana bilbayti/(in)
- (6) In: /fi:ʔ (separate), /bi/ (inseparable)
In the library
/bilmaktabati/ (in)
To multiply by
/Daraba fi:/
- (7) On: /9ala/ (separate), /9a/ (inseparable)
On Monday
/fi yami lʔiθnayni/ (in)
On the shelf
/ʔala rrafi/ (on)
- (8) By (exists only in English)
By Monday
/ʔali θnayni/
- (9) Of (exists only in English)
I am proud of him
/ʔana fakhouron bihi/ (in)

Zughoul (1979) classifies the prepositions that occur in the classroom phrases into the following three categories:

1. Case Prepositions:
 - a. Go with Ali
 - b. The cover of the book
 - c. It was taken by Samir
2. Lexical Prepositions:
 - a. Stand up
 - b. Sit down
 - c. Wait outside
3. Unit Prepositions:
 - a. Turn to lesson 6
 - b. at the back of the room
 - c. on Monday

Both case and lexical prepositions have direct translations in Arabic:

Case Prepositions	English	Arabic
agentive	by	/min qibali/
instrumental	with	/ibi/
dative	to	/li/
beneficiary	for	/li/ or /liʔajli/
genitive	of	/alʔidafah/ construction
comitative	with	/ma9a/
Lexical Prepositions	English	Arabic
	up	/ʔa9la/
	down	/ʔasfal/
	in (place)	/fi/
	on (place)	/9ala/
	to (motion)	/ʔila/
	into	/ʔila dakhili/
	beside	/bijanibi/
	in front of	/ʔamama/
	from	/min/
	before (time)	/qabla/
	before (place)	/muqabila/
	after (time and place)	/ba9da/
	behind	/waraʔa/ or /khalfa/
	under	/tahta/
	on top of	/fowqa/

III. General Characteristics of English and Arabic Prepositions:

A. English Prepositions:

English prepositions are defined negatively according to three criteria (Quirk et al., 1985). They cannot have as a complement:

1. a that clause
2. an infinitive clause
3. subject form of a personal pronoun

e.g.

* at (that) she noticed him

He was surprised * at to see her

* at she

Prepositions in English can serve to express a relation between two grammatical elements, prepositional complement and the object. For example, in the following *She put the sweater on her shoulder*, the complement of the preposition, *her shoulder* and the object *the sweater* are brought into a relation with one another. English prepositions can follow a nominal, a verbal or an adjectival as in the following examples respectively, (Hamdallah, 1988):

4. The teacher at school is pleasant.
5. He travelled to London.
6. The class was empty of students.

Another characteristic of English prepositions is that different prepositions used with the same word yield very different meanings. The verb + particle construction provides good example of this: the meaning of the construction *look at* changes completely if we substitute *for*, *up*, or *after* for *at*. Moreover, the meaning of a verb + particle is sometimes completely different from the individual meaning of the its constituents. For example, *do in in: He threatened to do in all those who betrayed him* means to kill, (Hamdallah, 1988).

English prepositions can be used with different parts of speech of the same root word. We use one preposition with the verb form, another with the adjective and still another with the noun form of the word. For example, we are *fond of* something, but we have *fondness for* it. In English, prepositions are either simple, single words, or complex consisting of more than one word.

B. Arabic Prepositions:

Arab grammarians used to classify Arabic words into three classes: *?asmaa?*, *?af9aal* and *huruuf*, which are nouns, verbs and particles respectively (Ibn Hisham, 1969:8). From the class of *huruuf*, "particles" the Arab grammarians separated prepositions which they called *huruuf ?al-jarr* "particles of attraction."

Traditional Arabic prepositions are divided into two morphological classes:

1. The first class consists of prepositions that have the shape of one consonant and one short vowel. These prepositions are *inseparable*. They occur as prefixes to the complement.

bi ---	at, by, in, with
li ---	to
ka ---	as, like
ta ---	by (in swearing)
wa ---	by (in swearing)

2. The second class consists of prepositions which are independent and either biliteral or triliteral. These prepositions are *separable*.

a. biliteral

9an	from, away from
fii	in, at
kay	in order to
min	from

b. triliteral

9alaa	on
9adaa	except
?ilaa	to, toward
hattaa	until, up to
la9allaa	perhaps
mataa	when
munðu	ago, for
xalaa	except

Some of the above mentioned prepositions take *?asmaa? aahira* "common nouns" as complements such as: *mun u*, *ka---*, *wa---*, *ta---*, etc. Other prepositions may take either *?asmaa? aahira* "common nouns", or *?asmaa? mudmara* "pronouns" as complements such as *9alaa*, *fii*, *min*, etc.

Some prepositions in Arabic such as *9an*, *min*, *9alaa* are used more frequently than other prepositions such as *xalaa*, *kay*, *mataa*, etc.

Like English prepositions, all Arabic prepositions such as *bi---*, *fii---*, *9alaa*, *?ilaa*, *li---*, *min*, *9an*, *munðu*, except *munðu* can occur both spatially and temporally. (Hamdallah, 1988).

IV. Sources of Difficulty and Linguistic Problems:

Khalil (1985), Khanji (1979), Schwabe (1981), Scott and Tucker (1974), Thahir (1987), and Zughoul (1979) all attest to the inherent difficulty and unpredictability of English prepositions.

Thahir (1987) indicates that English prepositions cause problems for Arab students learning English. They tend to use the Arabic preposition instead of the English one. Therefore, if students are not familiar with the English prepositions

and their meanings since they exist only in English such as *of*, *by*, and *at*, they may find problems.

Zughoul (1979) lists the following sources of difficulty in learning English prepositions. He points out that the first three of these sources are general difficulties while the last two are special problems faced by Arab EFL learners.

1. One obvious source of difficulty is the number of meanings each preposition carries.
2. Different prepositions used with the same work yield very different meanings. For example, *look at*, *look after*, *look up*, etc.
3. According to Takahashi (1969), English speakers are unable to offer a logical explanation for the occurrence of such prepositions or a conceptual guide of their usages.
4. Traditional methods of teaching such as the grammar-translation method, encourage students to translate in their minds.
5. Related to the problem of translation is interference from the native language, Arabic.

As to the problem of native-language (Arabic) interference, Scott and Tucker (1974) indicate that prepositions seldom have a one to one correspondence between English and Arabic. An Arabic preposition may be translated by several English prepositions while an English usage may have several Arabic translations. In their study, approximately two thirds of the errors in prepositions seemed to be attributable to native-language (Arabic) interference and one third to intra-English interference.

Scott and Tucker (1974) furthermore point out that errors involving omission of prepositions had their sources in both native-language and English interference. Redundant use of prepositions had its source chiefly in Arabic. Substitution of prepositions stemmed from both Arabic and English forms. Scott and Tucker (1974) conclude that Arab EFL learners learn the semantic meaning of the English lexical prepositions before they learn all the restrictions on their usage.

V. Types of Errors in Prepositions:

Generally speaking, errors involving the use of English prepositions by Arab EFL learners can be classified into three categories: substitution errors, redundant errors, and omission errors. Scott and Tucker (1974) define substitution errors as the use of a wrong word. Redundant errors mean that an unnecessary word was put in or that two or more words were used where only one was required. Omission errors mean that a word was left out where necessary. Examples of these three categories of preposition errors are given below:

1. Substitution Errors:
 - a. * in the third day.
 - b. * think in.
 - c. * Then he started to kill it by his knife.

- d. * One of the men sit down below the car to try to repair it.
- e. * The time was short to us.
- f. * Each month begins in Saturday.
2. Redundant Errors:
 - a. * judge on things.
 - b. * treating with others.
 - c. * I feel with happy.
 - d. * Factories make on littering.
 - e. * They make on illness of people.
3. Omission Errors:
 - a. * He came Monday.
 - b. * I was born 22nd of May, 1978.
 - c. * It is bordered from the east Iran.

In studying preposition errors made by Arab EFL students, Zughoul (1979) reached the following conclusions:

1. In some cases the English preposition corresponds exactly to its Arabic equivalent.
2. Sometimes, in expressing an idea in Arabic, we do not need to use a preposition (or any other word) to replace the English preposition.
3. Usually students try to memorize one main equivalent for each English preposition. While such one-to-one translation may give the proper English word in a number of cases, there are many instances in which it does not work.
4. The English preposition is not always expressed in Arabic by a preposition, its equivalent may be a different part of speech.

VI. Pedagogical Implications:

Scott and Tucker (1974) point out that mastery of preposition usage is a late acquisition in native-language learning as well. While prepositions are a frequent source of error their misuse does not hinder communication.

One way to help Arab EFL students in mastering English prepositions is to emphasize the following differences between English and Arabic prepositions:

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 except for the case of double prepositions.
3. Arabic prepositions have a distinctive feature. It affects the last vowel, whether it is short or long, of the word by changing it to a short vowel called *kasrah* or /i/. In English this feature is not found.
4. English prepositions are relatively various while Arabic prepositions are relatively limited.

5. English prepositions can be attached to verbs or nouns to form units with different meanings.
6. Some usages of English prepositions, specially those of *at*, *in*, *on* are ambiguous and difficult compared with the Arabic preposition which really replaces those prepositions in meaning.

Zughoul (1979) suggests that the English teacher (a) begin with situations that are as real and relevant to the student as possible and (b) see which prepositions and adverbs the student needs in order to communicate effectively, that is, to make himself understood correctly.

An obvious starting place is the classroom situation. Although for the adult this is not a "real" situation, it is certainly real for the student who spends the greater part of the day in a classroom (and, typically, for our students, at least one hour a day in an English class). To conduct a class, any class, a teacher has to give certain instructions. He says things like:

Stand up
 Sit down
 Wait outside
 Go to the blackboard
 Sit in front of Samir
 Write in ink
 Take off your coats
 etc.

Already, we have far more adverbs and prepositions than can be used in a single lesson, yet each one appears in a real communicative situation, not one invented by the teacher, such as:

The spoon is in the cup
 John is, going out of the shop
 John is at the barber shop

Pretended situations have their uses, but real situations are preferable when possible.

Zughoul (1979) makes clear the following points:

1. Certain descriptively accurate distinctions made by linguists may not have any place in a pedagogical grammar. Thus the adverb and preposition, respectively in *Sit down* and *He ran down the stairs* can be taught together with no mention of their labels.
2. The student is likely to make mistakes in the use of prepositions, but since communication is the chief goal of language teaching, I would advocate a greater tolerance of errors as long as they do not impede understanding. Instead of correcting all the student's errors, thereby putting him on the defensive and making him reluctant to talk, the teacher should simply use

the correct model while commenting, without interrupting the communication.

3. The influence of the native language need not be all negative. The teacher should make use of similarity between the two languages and give direct translations where they are appropriate and not likely to lead to overgeneralizations. In the classroom instructions listed above, the teacher can translate the prepositions (most of which have direct translations in Arabic).

Finally, McCarthy (1972) gives the following practical suggestions for teaching English prepositions to Arab EFL students:

1. One way to teach English prepositions would be to take the most common mistakes in the use of prepositions that our students make in their papers, group similar expressions, and teach a group of three or four prepositions at a time. It is best of course to begin with expressions that have a parallel expression in the students' own language. One group would be: *share with*, *cope with*, *confer with*. Another group could be: *call up*, *get up*, *look up*, *take up*. Another: *cross out*, *figure out*, *pick out*, *point out*; or: *ask for*, *call for*, *look for*, *vote for*. It is best to introduce only one group a day. Give several sentences for each expression, have the students give sentences, and perhaps have them combine two or more expressions, e.g.

I called up John, after I got up from my nap and looked up his phone number.

2. Secondly, introduce different expressions that are similar in structure and meaning, explain the difference, and give examples of each. Take, for example, *on time*, *in time*, *at 8 o'clock*. Combine them in one sentence:

If you come to class on time, i.e. at 8 o'clock, you will in time develop a good habit.

3. Thirdly, every once in a while write on the board the verbs that the students have learned:

get _____, look _____, take _____

and have them insert the preposition that goes with each verb, and then use the expressions in sentences. Or write a sentence on the board with the appropriate prepositions missing and have the students complete the sentence:

When I arrived _____ school _____ 8 o'clock, I went _____ the library, looked _____ some books, picked _____ two books, and read them _____ one hour.

If a verb can take more than one preposition, have the students explain the difference in meaning, e.g. looked *at* some books, looked *for* some books, looked *in* some books.

4. Finally, have the students do some activities such as crossword puzzles to vary the procedures and maybe to make them enjoyable.

It is perhaps only when we realize that English prepositions must be taught as distinct vocabulary items that we will begin to have our students master them.

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