

SOME REMARKS ON ARABIC-ENGLISH CONTRASTIVE STUDIES

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper¹ is two-fold. First, it seeks to present – albeit briefly – a discussion of the development of Arabic-English Contrastive Studies (henceforth AECS) and to comment on the points of strength and weakness of such studies. Secondly, the paper incorporates some representative titles of AECS conducted in different academic circles in the twentieth century, specifically in the second half of the century (cf. Appendix I and Appendix II).

This paper does not claim to be comprehensive either in terms of coverage or in terms of assessment. Indeed, as pointed out below, the history, magnitude, and significance of AECS are still matters that need further investigation. In this sense this paper may be considered as a pilot project that purports to put bits of pieces of information together and that awaits more input and feedback from scholars and researchers working on different aspects of AECS.²

Another point that is worth emphasizing at the outset concerns the writer's views on the strengths and weaknesses of AECS. Such viewpoints are restricted to those studies that are familiar to the writer and it is quite probable that they are not typical of other studies unknown to the writer.

2. A historical perspective

Arabic-English contrastive studies are not a recent development; their history goes back to the late 1950s of the twentieth century, and they were continued throughout that century. In fact, research in this field is still going on in different Arab and for-

¹ An earlier version of this paper was read at the Arabic-English Contrastive Studies Conference held at Al-Isra University in Amman on April 25th, 2001.

² For more titles of AECS the reader is referred to Mukattash (in press).

foreign universities. Recent issues of local, regional and international journals still carry papers on various aspects of AECS. Some of the titles I have come across over the last two years are indicative of the type of research activities that are being carried out in different parts of the Arab World. The following are some self-explanatory representative titles which shed light on different issues that relate to AECS:

- Bakir, M. 1999. "Verb movement, subject movement and word order in English and Arabic". In L. Mukattash. (ed.). 1999. 173-181.
- Fareh, S. and J. Hamdan 2000. "Locative alternation in English and Jordanian spoken Arabic". *PSiCL*. 36. 71-93.
- Hussein, A-S.³ 1999. "Negation in Cairene colloquial Arabic, English and French: An historical linguistic analysis". In L. Mukattash. (ed.). 183-191.
- Khalil, A. 2000. "Syntactic devices for marking information structure in English and Arabic". *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies (IJAES)*, 1:2. 133-156.
- al Khatib, A.⁴ 1998. Lexical, phonological and textual features of English and Arabic advertisements: A contrastive study. M. A. thesis, University of Jordan.

Since the initiation of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) in 1950s (cf. Lado 1957) Arab linguists, and in particular graduates of departments of English, hastened to compare English with either standard Arabic or with different dialectal varieties of spoken Arabic⁵. This may be described as the first phase of AECS (corresponding to a similar phase in America and Europe), which lasted for almost two decades (1960s and 1970s). However, some studies are still being conducted along the lines of CAH.

AECS during that period were characterised by:

1. Pedagogic orientation (i.e. listing differences between English and Arabic with the ultimate goal of arriving at possible difficulties) on the various linguistic levels (phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic and to a lesser extent, lexical).
2. Decontextualization of linguistic data (phones, words, sentences).

This was in line with research in CA conducted in the U.S.A. and Europe whose culminating point was the publication of the *Contrastive Structure Series* edited by Charles Ferguson and published under the auspices of the Center for Applied Linguistics (1956-1970) and the launching of different organized contrastive projects in

³ The abbreviation A-S and similar combinations stand for an Arabic name that consists of two parts (e.g. Abu-Sa'ad where the first part means *father of*).

⁴ The prefix *al-/el-* (equal to the definite article *the*) typically precedes Arabic family names. In fact, most Arabic family names are invariably used with/without such prefixes. In certain contexts the *al-* is (due to assimilation) pronounced as *as-* (e.g. *as-Safi*). There is no agreement as to whether such prefixes should count in arranging surnames alphabetically. In this paper these prefixes are disregarded.

⁵ It is possible that the earliest study is that of Raja Nasr (1955) which was conducted at the University of Michigan/Ann Arbor (see references).

Europe: German-English, Polish-English, Swedish-English, etc. All these projects initially announced pedagogical applications as their major objectives. However, many projects departed from their initial course of research with respect to the objective of CA or the linguistic theory employed for comparing L1 and L2 (cf. Fisiak 1980, Rusiecki 1976, James 1980).

The rise of T.G. and subsequent developments in linguistic theory reshaped the objectives and methodologies of CA, including AECS. Proponents of CA began to ascertain through serious and meticulous contrastive studies the legitimate contribution of their research to linguistic theory. Contrastive analyses that did not announce pedagogical applications as their major objective began to be referred to as "theoretical contrastive studies", the role of which can be summed up as follows:

1. testing the adequacy of a given linguistic theory through its application to pairs of Ls,
2. investigating how a given universal category is realized in the contrasted languages,
3. establishing language/linguistic universals, and
4. accumulating empirical evidence for formulating hypothetical constructs.

Theoretical CAs reflected current linguistic debate, on the one hand, and provided raw language material and linguistic insights from the languages contrasted, on the other hand. The shift from the applied "traditional" type of CA to theoretical studies in Europe (cf. Fisiak 1980), in particular, soon found its way to AECS. The following titles are self-explanatory:

- al Khuli, M. 1979. *A contrastive transformational grammar: Arabic and English*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Ali, L. 1983. "Remarks on particle movement and extrapolation from NP rules: A study in contrastive analysis". *PSiCL* 16. 33-41.

Subsequent developments in linguistic theory, particularly the departure from the view that language is a "formal system" (to a large extent independent of its users and its context of use) to the broader view of language use with context playing an essential role in the construction and interpretation of a text did not go unnoticed by proponents of CA. This change also shifted the centre of linguistic studies from linguistic competence to communicative competence and from the study of system to the study of performance and use and from the study of sentences to the study of text and discourse, pragmatics and communication strategies (Aziz 2000).

Again such developments were reflected in CA in general as well as in AECS. The following titles and subheadings are self-explanatory:

1. Text/Discourse CAs

- Fareh, S. 1988. Paragraph structure in Arabic and English expository Prose. Ph. D. dissertation. University of Kansas.

Williams, M. 1982. A contrastive analysis of text cohesion and development in Arabic and English. M. A. thesis. University of Leeds.

Zizi, K. 1987. Contrastive discourse analysis of argumentative and informative newspaper prose in Arabic, French and English. Ph. D. dissertation. University of Illinois.

2. Communication Strategies

Abu-Hantash, S. 1995. A contrastive study of politeness strategies between native speakers of Jordanian Arabic and native speakers of British English. M. A. thesis. Yarmouk University.

Eid, Y. 1991. Discourse analysis of compliments and invitations in English and Arabic: A contrastive study. M. A. thesis. University of Jordan.

3. The Expression of Concepts (under the influence of functional-notional grammars)

Ahmad, A-F. 1988. The expression of present and future time in English and Arabic. M.A. thesis. University of Jordan.

el Hassan, S. 1990. "Modality in English and Standard Arabic". *King Suad University Journal* 2. 149-166.

4. Pragmatics/Rhetoric

Hussein, M. 1984. Realization of request in English and Arabic. M. A. thesis. University of Basrah.

Fareh, L. 2001. Illocutionary forces of imperative sentences in English and Arabic: A contrastive study. M. A. thesis. University of Jordan.

5. Genres/Special Languages

Zarafili, S. 1986. Advertisements in English and Arabic. M. A. thesis. University of Bath.

al Khatib, A. 1998. Lexical, phonological and textual features of English and Arabic newspaper advertisements. M. A. thesis. University of Jordan.

3. Problems surrounding AECS

As pointed out above, the literature concerning AECS is vast. A Preliminary Bibliography which I have been working on over the last few years contains some 200 titles in CA (Mukattash in press), let alone works on Error Analysis and Interlanguage Studies, which by their very nature involve an element of contrast between L1 (Arabic) and L2 (English).⁶

The history of AECS and the interlanguage of Arab learners of English remains to be written, and I think it ought to be written and assessed. However, any person who plans to embark on such a project will encounter two major obstacles, which

⁶ The writer would like to thank the following colleagues for providing titles of AECS that were not included in an earlier draft of this bibliography: Nayef Kharmah, Saleh Al-Salman, Murtadha Bakir, Aziz Khalil, Rajai Al-Khanji, Shedah Fareh and Jihad Hamdan.

are by and large responsible for the unsatisfactory outcome of AECS over the last five decades. Amongst the major problems that surround AECS are the following:

1. Numerous works on AECS have not been published. I refer in particular to M.A. and Ph. D. theses written in American, British and Arab universities. It is not only that such dissertations have not been published but their titles are not made known to specialists and research students.
2. Although some AECS have been published in local or regional journals, they are not easily accessible to researchers.⁷
3. Most of the articles and papers published in local and regional journals, are not abstracted.⁸
4. The process of disseminating information on academic linguistics amongst Arab universities leaves much to be desired.

Another major problem surrounding AECS resides in the fact that all works in this field have been conducted individually. Unlike European contrastive projects, for instance, which are – or were – sponsored by academic institutions working in accordance with a certain plan of action, AECS, like linguistic research in general, have been left unattended to in spite of their significance, whether theoretical or applied.

This unsatisfactory situation accounts for two major negative aspects associated with AECS, namely (i) fragmentation and (ii) reduplication.

A cursory look at the titles of AECS in Appendix I and Appendix II does not fail to convince us that there is a great deal of repetition, quite often six or seven studies, even more, deal with the same category, process, or phenomenon. This is most obvious in major grammatical categories. For instance, amongst the processes and systems that have been frequently contrasted are:

1. V(P) in English and Arabic,
2. Segmental/Suprasegmental Phonemes in English and Arabic,
3. Negation in English and Arabic,
4. Articles in English and Arabic,
5. The Passive in English and Arabic.

This phenomenon of repetition is by no means restricted to major grammatical areas such as tense, voice and aspect (cf. Appendix I). Studies on specific syntactic or phonological features in English and Arabic are also repeated, sometimes with similar examples and appendices. Recently I came across two studies that are almost

⁷ With the exception of two or three journals, most regional research journals published by Arab universities are not strictly speaking specialized either in language or in linguistics.

⁸ Many research papers on AECS have appeared in *Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics (PSiCL)* and recently in *Poznań Studies in Contemporary Linguistics (PSiCL)* as well as in *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies (IJAES)* published by the Association of Professors of English and Translation at Arab Universities (APETAU).

identical. The two studies are concerned with locative alternation in English and Arabic, cf.

Mahmoud, A-J. 1999. "The syntax and semantics of locative alternation in Arabic and English", *Journal of King Saud University* 11. 37-59.

Fareh, S. and J. Hamdan 2000. "Locative alternation in English and Jordanian spoken Arabic", *PSiCL* 36. 71-93.

Obviously this is not a case of deliberate negligence but a logical conclusion of the situation described above (i.e. absence of coordination, or exchange of information).

The relative clause in English and Arabic is probably the most notorious example of repetition in AECS. The first study contrasting Arabic-English clauses was published some thirty years ago. Since then numerous contrastive studies dealing with the same issue have been appearing (see Appendix II) in different regional and international journals, the most recent of which is the following:⁹

Homeidi, Moheiddin 2000. "A syntactic contrastive analysis of the relative clause in Arabic and English". *PSiCL* 36. 95-110.

4. Some points of weakness

An investigation of a representative sample of AECS reveals that most (not all) studies share some negative features, chief amongst which are the following:¹⁰

1. Lack of theoretical contribution/orientation
2. Mixing language varieties
3. Imposition of English categories onto Arabic
4. Utilizing utterances that have doubtful acceptability

Below is a brief discussion of these weakness.

4.1. Minimal theoretical contribution

Apart from a couple of recent studies by Yowell Aziz (2000) and Murtadha Bakir (2000) the theoretical contribution of many AECS is rather minimal in the sense that:

1. Such studies do not employ or suggest explicit linguistic models or mechanisms for conducting contrastive analyses, and

⁹ The titles listed in Appendix I and Appendix II do not include general studies which would obviously deal with major grammatical categories/structures such as. tense, voice, relativization, etc. See, for instance, Mukattash (1978), Khalil (1996), Thahir (1987).

¹⁰ There seemed to be general agreement amongst conference participants (cf. footnote 1 above) as to the points of weakness in AECS.

2. They do not purport to test the adequacy of other models or theories. The closest they come to is testing a certain hypothesis against the facts of L1 (Arabic).

In addition, apart from some compartmentalized contrastive analyses in the field of phonetics and phonology, many AECS, particularly in the fields of syntax and discourse analysis, tend to be ad hoc, partial and seem to lack explicit theoretical foundations. Indeed many recent syntactic AECS are quite traditional. An exception to this are few studies that subscribe to a specific theory, model, or hypothesis, which aim to show that a given model works or does not work with Arabic (cf. Aziz 2001).

On the whole AECS tend to imitate other studies that compare a certain aspect of English with another aspect of another language, commonly European, but recently other Asian and African languages have been contrasted with English. The crucial point is that many AECS seem to be a replica of other CAs (where English is compared with another language) with regard to objectives, research methodology, argumentation and exemplification.¹¹

4.2. Mixing language varieties (standard and colloquial Arabic)

Although most AECS choose a specific variety of Arabic for comparison (e.g. standard vs. dialects), some studies draw data from the two sources. This is particularly true in the case of interlanguage studies and studies on error analysis where contrasting L1 with L2 may establish the source of deviant/idiosyncratic forms. I will not pursue this point here since it has been recently discussed in a comprehensive manner by Bakir (2000).

4.3. The imposition of English categories onto Arabic

Most AECS are conducted in Departments of English at Arab Universities *by faculty members and graduate students* and by virtue of their linguistic training in English they are more familiar with descriptions of English than those of Arabic, and thus tend to impose grammatical categories postulated for the description of English onto Arabic. Such a move is bound either to leave some Arabic facts unaccounted for or to force a category that is idiosyncratic of English onto Arabic, sometimes at the expense of considerations of acceptability, grammaticality and style. What adds to the complexity of the situation is the fact that some researchers in AECS have no solid command of standard Arabic and no adequate knowledge of Arabic grammars.

¹¹ The contribution of some AECS is rather mechanical that merely involves bringing together a known analysis of Arabic and another known analysis of English. An obvious example is Arabic and English relative clauses. Indeed there is more than one study in English on Arabic relative clauses (cf. Appendix II).

4.4. Questions of acceptability, grammaticality and style

In their endeavours to force a model/hypothesis of an L2 (i.e. English) category onto Arabic, some researchers come up with odd/unacceptable forms, utterances and sometimes pronunciation. Indeed, it is not unusual to spot instances of unacceptable forms and structures that are claimed to belong either to standard Arabic or to colloquial Arabic, or even to a specific variety of spoken Arabic (e.g. Cairene Arabic). Using a cover term for a certain Arabic dialect like Jordanian Arabic, for instance, is illusive, for one can recognize different dialectal varieties in Jordan. Even in capital cities like Cairo, Amman, Damascus, one can recognize different dialects, quite often reflecting all geographic and social variations in the country.¹²

5. A brighter view

The points of weakness mentioned above are not only typical of AECS. They are most probably true of linguistic research in the Arab World in general. Nonetheless, in spite of the negative aspects, there is always the positive side. Amongst the major contributions of AECS are:

1. Research findings of many AECS are often cited in international research journals and in books on CA.
2. Raw material contained in works on AECS are often made use of by other researchers to support certain models/hypotheses in theoretical linguistics, psycholinguistics or in the field of language universals.
3. The pedagogic significance of AECS cannot be totally ignored. Indeed, some ELT courses used in primary and secondary schools in Arab countries (e.g. Jordan and Palestine) make ample use of the findings of AECS.
4. Some AECS have prompted the adoption of modern linguistic techniques and principles in the analysis of Arabic (in contradistinction to prevailing traditional analyses).

One of the most important contribution of AECS resides in the fact that some of these studies have established, *de facto*, that Arabic dialects and spoken varieties of Arabic are legitimate domains for contrast and comparison with standard English (British and American). In fact, Bakir (2000) goes as far as suggesting that reference to the spoken/dialectal varieties of Arabic is a necessary condition for the execution of certain types of contrastive analyses. This is particularly true in comparing the various areas of the sound system where recourse to standard Arabic may not adequately account for the various idiosyncratic pronunciations of English by speakers of different Arab countries. Bakir (2000: 232) explains that this is so because "SA [standard Arabic] is not normally used in speech, people may write in SA, but they

¹² This is also true of interlanguage studies and studies on errors committed by Arab learners of English. I discuss this issue with some details elsewhere (Mukattash 1981).

speak in their colloquials which constitute their mother tongues." He further elaborates on this issue:

"In those formal situations where SA is used in speech, the speakers transfer their dialectal sound features into the Standard. This is why SA is spoken with different regional accents" (2000: 232).

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- Thahir, M. 1987. A contrastive analysis of some syntactic features in English and Arabic. Ph. D. dissertation, University of Indiana, Bloomington.

APPENDICES

Appendix I: AECS: Verbs, verb phrases and verbal categories

- Abdul-Fattah, H. 1984. Analysis and comparison of English and Arabic tense system. Ph. D. dissertation. University of Gent.
- Ahmad, A-F. 1988. The expression of present and future time in English and Arabic: A contrastive study. M. A. thesis. University of Jordan.
- Ailouti, R. H. 1995. The translation of the progressive aspect in the Holy Quran into English: A search for functional equivalence. M. A. thesis. University of Jordan.
- al Aswad, M. K. 1983. Contrastive analysis of Arabic and English verbs in tense, aspect and structure. Ph. D. dissertation. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- Atawneh, A. in press. "A contrastive study of aspect in English and Arabic". *IJAES*, 2.1 and 2.
- Aziz, Y. 1992. "Modality in English and Arabic". *Turjuman* 1. 101-115.
- Bakir, M. 1996. "Notes on passive and pseudo-intransitive constructions in English and Arabic". *PSiCL* 31. 39-49.
- Bakir, M. 1999. "Verb movement, subject movement, and word order in English and Arabic". In Mukattash, L. (ed.). 173-181.

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- Justice, D. B. 1981. The semantics of form in Arabic in the mirror of European languages. Ph. D. Dissertation. University of California, Berkeley.
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- Younis, T. 1989. The Problem of Tense in Translation. M. A. thesis. Yarmouk University.

Appendix II: AECS on relative clauses and some studies on Arabic relative clauses

- Abdel-Hafiz, A. S. 1999. "Restrictive relative clauses in English and standard Arabic". *Occasional Papers* 29. 183-199.
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