

THE TRANSFER OF ARABIC IN THE ENGLISH WRITINGS OF LEBANESE STUDENTS*

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show through error analysis the interference of the mother-tongue, Arabic, in the English writings of Lebanese students, which leads to language transfer. To this end, I have collected 73 English essays written by Lebanese sophomore students studying at the American University of Beirut. Since my mother-tongue is also Arabic, the transfer errors made by these students were easily spotted upon examining their essays, thus simplifying the task of error analysis. What remained was a subclassification of these errors. It turned out that the transfer of Arabic linguistic structures influenced the English writings of Lebanese students on the grammatical, lexical, semantic and syntactic levels.

Key-words: *language interference; transfer; error analysis; contrastive analysis.*

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é mostrar, através da Análise de Erros, a interferência da língua materna - no caso, o árabe - no inglês escrito de estudantes libaneses, o que leva à transferência linguística. Para isso foram coletados 73

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ensaios em inglês escritos por alunos de segundo ano da Universidade Americana de Beirute. Como minha língua materna também é o árabe, esses erros de transferência foram facilmente localizados ao examinar os ensaios, simplificando, assim, a tarefa de Análise de Erros. O resultante foi uma sub-classificação desses erros. Ficou constatado que a transferência das estruturas lingüísticas do árabe influenciou nos níveis gramatical, léxico, semântico e sintático.

Palavras-chave: *interferência lingüística; transferência; análise de erros; análise contrastiva.*

1. Introduction

Every foreign language teacher has had experience with interference. Interference is the negative influence of the mother language (L1) on the performance of the target language learner (L2) (Lado, 1964). Research on second language acquisition has long acknowledged the important role of this linguistic influence, which results in language transfer. According to Oldin (1989), "Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired." Many studies have been carried out on the different perspectives of transfer such as the transfer of rhetorical redundancy (Bartlet, 1983), the transfer of absolutes (Oldin, 1992), pragmatic transfer (Kasper, 1992), and the transfer of textual organization (Fakhri, 1994). Indeed, a review of the recent literature written on transfer points out to the need for more research in the area of contrastive linguistics, this time to study which linguistic structures are transferred from Arabic (L1) into English (L2). This is exactly the purpose of this research. Perhaps the best way to discover such transfer is

through error analysis (Sridhar, 1980), i.e. analyzing the systematic errors that students make in their English writings in order to find out which mistakes result from their native Arabic language influence. Needless to say, when the language teacher shares the same mother tongue with his/her students and has been a foreign language learner, distinguishing transfer errors from other kinds of errors becomes much easier. Such is the case with this author and her ESL students. Both have Arabic as their mother tongue and the author has once been an ESL student. Therefore, as far as this study is concerned, error analysis no longer involved pulling out all types of error and attributing them to their respective sources in order to distinguish transfer errors. These were apparent upon reading the students' essays. Error analysis, thus, was reduced to categorizing the types of transfer errors made by the students.

As a result, the author selected 73 English essays written by Lebanese native speakers of Arabic taking an intermediate level English course. The analysis of these essays revealed frequent grammatical, lexical, semantic, and syntactic errors brought about by the transfer of Arabic linguistic structures into English. The following are samples of these errors.

2. Grammatical errors (558 errors)

Among the grammatical errors made by Lebanese ESL students are errors in agreement, articles and prepositions.

2.1 Agreement (75 errors)

Arabic verbs agree with their subjects in person, number and gender (Scott and Tucker, 1974:83). Hence, Arab students make few subject-verb agreement errors in their essays except where the subject's number is confusing (see singular vs. plural words). However, another kind of agreement error occurs: that of adjectives or adverbs agreeing with the nouns they modify.

In English, few adjectives show agreement in number with the nouns they modify, such as 'this-these' and 'that-those'. Other adjectives are used to modify singular as well as plural nouns. In Arabic, however, the situation is different. Adjectives agree in number with the nouns they modify. As a result, agreement errors of this type occur in the English writings of Lebanese students. For example, students write the following:

* My sister goes to *others* shops.

instead of: My sister goes to other shops.

* The art of *paragraphs* writing...

instead of: The art of paragraph writing...

The italicized words above take the plural form in Arabic.

2.2 Articles (155 errors)

In English, abstract words referring to ideas, attributes, or qualities are used without the article 'the' to refer to that idea or attribute, etc. which belongs to everybody or everything. In Arabic, however, such abstract words are

preceded by a definite article equivalent to 'the' in English. Hence, errors pertaining to the misuse of the article 'the' occur. For instance, students write the following:

* *The* marriage is a holy ceremony.

instead of: Marriage is a holy ceremony.

* *The* persistence is necessary for *the* success.

instead of: Persistence is necessary for success.

On the other hand, abstract words become specific when they are preceded by the article 'the' in English (Kinneavy and Warriner, 1993: 607). They become the possession of a certain person, group, object, etc. The usual way of expressing this possession is by a phrase starting with 'of', 'to', or 'for'. For example, the following sentences are correct in English:

You must study geography.

but: Tom studied the geography of England.

In contrast, Arabic does not make use of an article before an abstract term when it is the possession of a specific person or object. Rather, the abstract word is rendered specific by the modifying noun that follows it. It is not surprising then that the students wrote the following sentence:

* The victims of *the* war are many.

instead of: The victims of war are many.

(war here is general and not specific.)

2.3 Prepositions (247 errors)

Prepositions pose a great difficulty for an ESL learner since there are various prepositions in English that have the same function. For instance, the prepositions 'in', 'at' and 'on' in the following sentences indicate place with subtle differences in usage (which the ESL student is usually unaware of except at an advanced stage).

He is in the garden.

He is at home.

He lives on campus.

As a result, when students are not sure which preposition to use in a certain sentence, they often compare that sentence with its Arabic equivalence, giving a literal translation of that Arabic preposition in English. However, "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" (Scott and Tucker, 1974:85). Once again, such translations are the cause of errors, especially in the case of 'in'. Below are such examples:

* I mean *in* this example.

instead of: I mean by this example.

* Driving *in* a high speed.

instead of: Driving at a high speed.

These two examples take the same preposition in Arabic which corresponds to 'in' in English. Other preposition errors are the following:

* He is ready *to* the exam.

instead of: He is ready for the exam.

since the Arabic version is equivalent to 'to'.

* ...*under* your disposal.

instead of: ...at your disposal.

since the Arabic version is equivalent to 'under'.

* Do not show off intellectually, financially or anything *from* this sort.

instead of: Do not show off intellectually, financially or anything of this sort.

since the preposition used in Arabic is equivalent to 'from'.

3. Singular vs. plural words (81 errors)

An ESL learner is unable to determine whether a certain English word is singular or plural based on its form alone. Some words that end with the plural form 's' are actually singular in number, whereas others indicate a singular or plural number while maintaining the same form (Kinneavy and Warriner, 1993: 712,972). Faced with this complexity of

the English number, it is only natural that ESL students resort to literal translation from Arabic when determining whether a certain English word is singular or plural. The following sentences were written by the students:

- * Statistics *are* often carried out to determine the increase in population.

instead of: Statistics is often carried out to determine the increase in population.

Here, 'statistics' not only ends with the plural form 's' but is also a plural word in Arabic which explains why students often mistake it for a plural word in English.

- * We have a lot of *homeworks* for today.

instead of: We have a lot of homework for today.

- * The registrar has *informations* on all university faculties.

instead of: The registrar has information on all university faculties.

Both 'homework' and 'information' take the plural form in Arabic and are plural in number.

4. Lexical errors (217 errors)

Due to their limited English vocabulary, Lebanese ESL learners frequently translate words from Arabic to express a certain idea in English, unaware of the English collocations (i.e. word 'A' in a certain English sentence coexists with word 'B' and not with 'C' even though 'B' and 'C' may be synonymous). In other words, one word in Arabic can be translated into English by several words. It remains for the student to determine which word collocates with the meaning expressed in the sentence.

The following lexical errors are, therefore, made by students:

* Doctors *describe* medications for their patients.

instead of: Doctors prescribe medications for their patients.

since in Arabic, the equivalent of 'describe' is used for 'medications' as well as for nature.

* Man and woman *continue* each other.

instead of: Man and woman complete each other.

since in Arabic, the equivalent of 'continue' is used in this context.

5. Semantic errors (106 errors)

Semantic and often funny errors occur when students use literal translation to convey in English flowery (exuberant) Arabic expressions, idioms or proverbs. This, they hope, will enrich their essays. The outcome is as follows:

* I *cut a promise* on myself.

instead of: I promised myself.

* He *fell in the fault*.

instead of: He made a mistake.

* One cannot change *between one night and the other*.

instead of: One cannot change overnight.

6. Syntactic errors (193 errors)

Among the frequent syntactic errors are those of word order, coordination and omission of the copula.

6.1 Word order (102 errors)

A common syntactic error that students commit as a result of transfer is faulty word order. In English, adjectives usually precede the nouns they modify (Kinneavy and Warriner, 1993: 606). However, in Arabic, they generally follow them. As a result, this Arabic grammatical rule leads Lebanese students to produce the following sentences:

* Here are *three rules* very helpful.

instead of: Here are three very helpful rules.

A similar mistake occurs with the use of adverbs since an adverb that modifies an adjective or another adverb usually precedes that adjective or adverb (Kinneavy and Warriner, 1993: 616). Once again, in Arabic, this is not the case. Hence, students write the following:

* Every person *almost* has a car.

instead of: Almost every person has a car.

following the Arabic word order.

6.2 Coordination (57 errors)

In English, items in a series are separated by commas, and the coordinate conjunction 'and' is used just before the last word. On the other hand, in Arabic, each item in a series is preceded by the conjunction 'wa' which is equivalent to 'and'. Accordingly, the following sentence is perfectly correct in Arabic:

* My favorite fruits are cherries *and* peaches *and* pears *and* watermelons.

but quite odd in English.

6.3 Omission of the copula (34 errors)

Since Arabic has no copula, Lebanese students neglect to use those structures in English (Scott and Tucker, 1974:77-79). For example, students wrote the following:

* If you are preparing for a party but not sure of its success...

instead of: If you are preparing for a party but are not sure of its success...

* No doubt that an educated wife raises her kids better than an uneducated one.

instead of: There is no doubt that an educated wife raises her kids better than an uneducated one.

7. Conclusion

As has been demonstrated above, the transfer of Arabic structures in the English writings of Lebanese students has produced a number of errors on the grammatical, lexical, semantic, and syntactic levels. Nevertheless, it appears that Lebanese students made more errors in the areas where they felt English and Arabic were rather similar (articles, prepositions, choice of diction). However, where there were gross differences between the two language systems, fewer errors were made. It is hoped that future studies of linguistic errors would yield better insight into the strategies that Arab students apply in the acquisition of English as a second language.

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