Arabic Interference in English Learning and its implications on translation from Arabic into English

Mustafa Saleh Al-Said, Ajlun University College, Al Balqa Applied university, Jordan

Abstract:
This is an analytical study of Arabic interference in English learning and its implications on translation from Arabic into English. It shows that Arabic negative transfer causes frequent errors in the usage of pronouns, diction, sentence structure, relative clauses, prepositions, and numbers with nouns, articles and word order. The study emphasizes the need for giving these problems special attention in order to eliminate them and enhance the students ability in translation. But the study also reveals that there is a positive Arabic transfer that can be used as a basic technique for a translation teaching method that enhances the learners competency in translation.

1. Introduction

Translation as defined by the Longman Dictionary of American English is to change speech or writing from one language(L1) into another( L2). It is “the restatement of the forms of one language in another: the chief means of exchanging information between different language communities”(McArthur 1052).Therefore, it depends on the translator bilingual competency which entails thorough knowledge of the source language( L1) and the target language ( L2). Therefore, methods of communication of L2 should be used in order to transfer the message or content of L1 text properly. For example, when we translate from Arabic into English, the English version should read English. In other words, it should follow the rules and methods of expression adopted in English; it should be free of Arabic structures or word order. But no one can deny the mother tongue of the learners has its bearing on the second language. Therefore, this study highlights the main areas of Arabic influence on the translations rendered by students of Ajlun University college in Jordan. Once the categories of errors are identified, an adequate solution will adopted to eliminate this influence. The teacher will find a feasible teaching method that facilitates the teaching –learning process to ensure better translation free of errors resulting from the mother-tongue negative influence.

2. Review of related literature:

Mother tongue negative transfer on learning a second language has been under focus by some researchers. Transfer as defined by Odlin “is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the TL and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired(1994: 27) Brown sees transfer as “the interaction of previously acquired linguistic and/or conceptual knowledge with the present learning event to facilitate a new language learning task.” (2007:117).

On the other hand there is a positive transfer that “influences language development even in the absence of specific overt similarity” (Gass, 1996). This will be shown in this study.

But, negative transfer influence on second language learning is greater than that of the positive one, because it hinders learning of appropriate target language forms. This negative impact can “actually inhibit, prevent, or make more difficult the acquisition of some feature of the target language” (Corder1983).

Some researchers view mother tongue negative interference as the main source learner's errors. Mother tongue or second language acquisition is a habit formation; the learner’s first language habits overlap with the new ones as Norrish (1987) believes. When students are not competent enough to express their message across, they are likely to resort to their first language: they “use words and structures from their own language and try to make them fit into the foreign language.” (Edg1989: 7).
3. Method of the Study:
The researcher randomly selected 100 English samples of the final translations test papers of Jordanian native speakers of Arabic taking general course in translation as compulsory course in the B.A. English program at Ajlun University College/ al Balqa Applied University during the academic year 2011-2012. All the students were Arab females and they had been taught English for 12 years in the primary and secondary levels. The samples were corrected and errors were classified into categories. The analysis of the material showed frequent errors in the usage of pronouns, diction, sentence structure, relative clauses, prepositions, numbers with nouns, articles and word order.

4. Discussion:
4.1. Pronouns (180 errors):
Errors in pronoun usage formed the greatest percentage. It is already known that the-s simple present form in English is used with the third person singular. As there is no corresponding form to this in Arabic, Arab students tend to use the simple form without an “s” in their translations or writings, especially when the subject is a third person singular pronoun. This is a very frequent error. Consider the following example:

He eat breakfast in the morning. “Eat” is used instead of “eats”. If a noun is used “eat” is still used: “The boy eat”. The “waw” and the “nun” form the suffix used to indicate plurality of the verb, depending on the word order. It is used when the subject precedes the verb: S+V+Nun. But, it is not used when the verb comes first. we can say “Hum Ya’kulun: They eat.” but it is ya’kul if it precedes the plural or singular subject: Ya’kul al rijal( s plural+v) “The men are eating” which may literally be rendered: eat the men. Thus, the singular verb can be used with plural and singular subject: Ya’kul al awlad: The boy eats and Yakul al awlad: the boys eat. In Arabic the verb normally comes first but when it comes second the suffix “nun” is added to the verb: Al awlad Ya’kulun: The boys eat.

As the simple present tense of the verb from lacks the suffix “s”, Arab students tend to forget using it in their English writings. Some examples are:
She prepare her lessons every night. (prepares).
He like milk. (likes)
He take care of his children. (takes)

Subject pronouns are sometimes used with antecedents in Arabic for certain rhetorical purposes. This is frequently reflected in their English writings. Examples are:
The boy he broke the window.
The college it is near the street.
Salma she sat near the window.
The students they come to the college in the morning.

These examples shows the students replicate the usage of the Arabic third person separation pronouns that are inserted between the defined subject and predicate to prevent any possibility for the predicate being taken as a mere apposition. This is done even when the subject is a pronoun of the first or second person (Wright ii 258-9):
Al- ghina huwa al – qunu’a: The only true wealth is contentment.
Zaidun huwa afdhaul min Umr.: Zaid is more excellent than Umr.
Allah huwa al-Hayy al-Qayyum: Allah is the Living the Self-subsisting.

Examples of usage of such pronouns are abundant in the Holy Quran.

4.2. Diction (170 errors):
Arab students tend to translate literally from Arabic. Consider the following examples:
I exceeded the exam.
Exceed in this sentence is an equivalent to the Arabic “ edjatatu” as when we say “You exceeded the speed limit”.

Another example is:
I forgot the door open, I will reverse to close it.” Reverse” is used instead of “go back”.
My mother helped the woman put her baby. The verb “put” is used her instead of “deliver”.

ISSN:2251-1571
The International Journal's
Research Journal of Social Science & Management

www.theinternationaljournal.org > RJSSM: Volume: 02, Number: 07, November-2012   Page 141
This kind of errors indicates that student not only have both a limited vocabulary and a limited knowledge of the words meanings.

4.3. Sentences structure(160):
Arabic sentences can be categorized into several classes, but for the purpose of this study, the focus is on statements. There are two types Arabic sentences: the nominal and the verbal sentences:
The nominal sentence begins with a noun or pronoun. It has subject, verb, object or complement. Often the nominal sentence does not have a verb. Thus, the word order of this kind of sentences is: S+ V+ C or N+ N(C). But, the verbal sentences start with a verb: V+ s+ C. Then how does Arabic negatively affect the students translation into English"

To answer this question consider the following examples:
The camel patient.
Fahad his car very ancient.
The College very tough.
The origin of mansaf in Jordan.
The exam very difficult.
The population of the city not too much.

All of the above sentences lack verbs. They express a situation or describe something. They are identical to Arabic sentences in order. In fact, they read Arabic. Linking verbs are not used in Arabic to connect the subject to the predicate. If (Ali is angry), Arabs to say (Ali angry) without using the verb “is”. However, the word order of the Arabic nominal sentence can facilitate learning the word order of the English sentence because both forms in both languages are the same: S+V+C. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that the Arabic nominal sentence of this type is used for certain rhetorical purposes. The word order is significant and the translator job is to reflect this significance. Wright believes that the difference between the verbal and the nominal sentence is “that the former relates an act or event, the latter gives a description of a person or thing, either absolutely, or in the form of a clause of state. This is the constant rule in good Arabic, unless the desire to emphasize a part of the sentence be the cause of a change in its position” (251-2). This inference should be taken into consideration in translation. However, the nominal sentences are frequently used in spoken Arabic. For example: Al Walad (s) Kasar (v) ashubak (o). The word order in this sentence is the same order of the English sentence: The boy broke the window. Therefore, this type of Arabic sentences may facilitate learning good English sentences.

Yet, some researchers are misinformed that Arabic verbs agree with their subjects in person, number and gender (Scott and Tucker, 1974:83). This is not always the case as we have seen from above examples. Often a singular verb is used with two persons or plural. For example: Ja’a abda el-sultanat: The two slaves of the sultan came (Wright ii:250). A singular Arabic verb is used with a dual subject. If the nominal sentence is used, the Arabic verb would be ja’a a( with suffix a that indicates duality). The singular verb can also be used with plural subject: Ja’a bunu al-malik: the sons of the king came (Wright ii: 250). If inverted, the verb would be bunu al-malik Ja’au with the suffix “u” indicating plurality.

This may not constitute a problem for translation from Arabic into English when the context in the past, but it does when the tense of the verb is present. For example:
My father has three wives.
The student read his lessons daily.

As said before, Arabic does not have an ‘s’ as a suffix to be used with singular verb. This has a negative effect on the students’ writing as they fail to use the “s” with the present forms the English verb.

4.4. Relative Clauses (155 errors):
One of the most most common errors made by Arab students is using the objective pronoun in relative clauses. In Arabic several pronouns can be used to connect the dependent clause to the main
clause. There are different pronouns for first, second third persons, time, place, male, female... etc. For example: *hatha el kitab althi ishtraytu hu*. *Hu* is a “suffixed pronoun” used to refer the preceding noun *kitab*. It is rendered in English as:

This book which I bought it. “It” is used as an equivalent to “*hu*”

Other examples are:

*I know the man whom you met him yesterday.*
*I like my city which I borined [sic] and grew up in it.*

In addition to errors in diction and spelling, notice the usage of “him” and “it”; they are replications of the Arabic pronouns.

In some cases, especially in spoken Arabic, the relative pronoun is deleted as in following sentence:
*Tastatee’a istikhdam al isharah letukalim shaks laa yatakalam* This sentence is rendered in English as:

You can use signal to talk someone can’t talk.

Other examples are:

*I helped blind man can’t see the road.*
*I gave the letter to boy ride the bike.*
*All persons don’t work are not happy.*

4.5. Prepositions (150 errors):

Very often, Arab students make errors in the usage of prepositions in English:
*I went with my friend to the fish market to show her that we know for the fish.*

The underlined phrase is a literal translation from Arabic. The student wanted to say that she knew well the good types of fish.

To express cause or reason, the preposition “*min*” (from) is sometimes used. This usage is transferred into the translation:
*She couldn’t come to college from cough.* This means that she could come to college because of cough.

In Arabic the preposition “*fi*” (in) is used with time expressions particularly with dates and days:
*I was born in Jan 25, 1979.* (I was born on Jan 25, 1979)

*We had a test in Monday.* (On Monday). “In” is used instead of “on”; it also instead of “at”.

“I see you in the night= I see you at night.”

“From” is frequently used as an equivalent of “min” to express anger or pleasure:
*Khiled is angry from Ali.* In this sentence “from” is literal translation of “min”.

4.6. Number + Nouns (149):

The numbers 2-9 take plural nouns in Arabic. For example: *Kitaban* is plural means two books, *sitat kutub*: six books, but *ahad Asher Kuwkaben* vs. eleven planets. *Alf madrasah* vs. one thousand schools (plural).

Consider the following examples and notice that singular nouns are used instead of plural ones.

There are 20 building near my house.
*Jordan has eight large city.*
*It has more one thousand school.*
*I borrowed three thousands dollar.*

Due to Arabic negative interference, all the numbers in these sentences precede singular nouns: building, city, school, and dollar. Theses nouns should be plural of course, but in the last sentence the word (thousands) is used because the word “Alf” means a thousand. It can be” *Alaaf*” i.e. plural when it is preceded by a number from three to ten. We can say : *thalath-t alaaf* (three thousand) or *asharat alaaf* (ten thousand ). But the words *alaaf* and *uluf* (plural) are equivalents to thousands in English: thousands of people poured down the street: *Alaaf anas nazalu ela ash-shari’a.*

Some English uncountable nouns such as information, equipment, news have plural equivalents in Arabic. Students use plural forms of these nouns in their translations from Arabic into English:
We had many informations today. *Ma’lumat* is the plural of *Ma’lumetun* which stands for “information”. Equipment is usually *Mua’datun* (plural) in Arabic. It is usually used in students’ writings: equipments. Other examples are:

The news were very bad.
Mathematics are difficult.

4.7. Articles (144 errors):
The article “al”, called by the Arabs the instrument of definition is the only definition article; it is always written with the word following it to define it. On the contrary, English has three articles *a*, *an* and *the*. Arab students do not often use *a* or *an*; they use the zero Arabic article: Ali is great teacher.

In English the article the is not sometimes used with abstract nouns whereas it is used in Arabic: The science is good (*al elumu jayyidun*).

The patience is the key of happiness after the suffering.

In the Arabic genitive case, the second element defines the first one. In this case, the definite article is used the second element. This usage is replicated in the student’s English writing: this was a mistake of the teacher.

On the other hand, abstract words become specific when they are preceded by the article 'the' in English (Kinneavy and Warriner, 1993: 607). They express them by using 'of', 'to', or 'for'. For example, the following sentences are correct in English:

*I did not study history.* History in this sentence is generic, but is specific in: *I studied the history of Ummayyed Dynasty*.

4.8. Word Order (140):
The defining Arabic words or adjectives usually follow the noun they modify. As a result, Arab students keep this order in place when they translate into English. Consider the following examples:

Ahamd is a teacher very nice.
Nothing in the life better than the wife good and wise.

5. Conclusion
As has been demonstrated above, the analysis of the translation samples showed frequent errors in the usage of pronouns, diction, sentence structure, relative clauses, prepositions, numbers with nouns, articles and word order. This proves that Arabic has a negative transfer on the student’s performance in translation. This entails that necessary steps be taken to eliminate or at least curb this ailment. To solve this problem, new methods of teaching should be adopted in schools and universities. Students should be encouraged to think in English when they write or translate. Students should be taught how to carry contrastive analysis of Arabic and English.

The study also showed that Arabic has positive transfer on the translation process. These positive points should not be over looked. A new teaching translation method may be based on. The following technique may become the core of this method:

- The translation course should focus on simple sentences first: this enables the students to compare and contrast the structure of Arabic and English sentences.
- At the beginning of the course, the sentences should consist of concrete words with definite meanings or referents. In other words, the denotation rather than the connotation of the word that should be emphasized first.
- The sentences should be realistic to enable the student render their translation properly, because the meanings of the words reflect a realistic situation. Teachers can make use of the daily events news. This does not entail hard effort or thinking of the meanings conveyed because they are already known.
- The teacher can guide the students to find out the main parts of the English sentence to be produced in the correct order. For example: the teacher writes the sentence on the chalk board:
Katab( verb2: wrote) alwalad( subject1; the boy) ad-drsa( object3: the lesson).
The numbers show the word sequence of the English sentence:
The sentence order is 1+2+3 : The boy wrote the sentence.
- The teacher can make use of the positive transfer of Arabic. For example the sentence cited above as example of faulty word order can be corrected as follows:
The teacher writes the sentence on the chalkboard.
Ahmad is a teacher very nice.
Then, the error is explained . after that the teacher writes the original Arabic sentence from right to left:
(a article 3)(jiddan: very4)(r ai’un:nice 5)(Mualimun: teacher6)(linking verb: is2 )Ahmad( s1). Then the teacher draws the students attention to word order: 1+2+3+4+5+6 : Ahmad is a very nice teacher. He emphasizes the fact that the modifying words of the predicate in are kept in place when rendered in English. At the beginning the teacher may use phrases only: he can make use of tables for illustrations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jameel</th>
<th>Bait</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beautiful</td>
<td>House</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Arabic words are in their proper sequence from right to left and also the English words convey their meaning without change the word order from left to right.
The above table can be applied when translating from English into Arabic, too. Take for example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Proper</th>
<th>Sequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jidan</td>
<td>Jayyid</td>
<td>Munsib</td>
<td>Talsul</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The word fits both Arabic and English: the Arabic order is from right to left while the English order is from left to right. The meaning in both versions is the same.
Finally ,this method needs verification by conducting an experimental study to see if there is significant difference between this method and the traditional method of teaching translation.

References