

***Interfering mechanisms of Arabic and French
with English: the case of first year students of
English***

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In the light of what had been noticed during a number of years teaching first year students in the department of English, we could relatively easily assert that the learning and more particularly the practice of this foreign language at this particular level is somewhat special for a number of reasons. The way a great number of learners use English in class is far from being the best, and often, this causes a rift between the thought the student has and the words he uses to express it. The stress here is on this aspect that may be easily viewed as a serious handicap to learn and practice this second foreign language appropriately.

By and large, the difficulties in question could be divided into two types. The first one is relatively simple and is linked to the ignorance of English, something easily understandable if we refer to the normal process of learning any foreign language. The second type is more complex. It is the direct result of the contact that exists between different languages. Here, the difficulties the student meets in learning and practising English are not easy to tackle. This is primarily due to the already established presence of the two other linguistic systems

and, in the majority of cases, this is going to interfere with the acquisition of the different forms of the new language. In this respect, some questions arise here which are related not only to the process of learning but also to the learner himself.

- What is the linguistic profile of a first year student learning English ?

- Which type of mistakes recur throughout the student's writings and oral works?

- Are these interfering mechanisms of Arabic and French with English essentially syntactic or semantic? In other words, are we here in front of a student who finds difficulties in how to combine the words to make correct sentences, or are we concerned with a learner who knows those rules but who does not know how to reach a meaningful sentence?

These are the questions to which the present paper will attempt to answer to explain a particular linguistic behaviour that characterizes mainly first year students learning English, bearing in mind that these learners had already been in contact with at least two other languages: their mother tongue and another foreign language.

Initially, it would be quite useful to determine the linguistic profile of a first year student learning English. Such a task does not necessarily require a survey, and we could, without much pretension and important risks assert that the subject in question has in almost all the cases, a linguistic experience of three languages: Arabic as first language or mother tongue, French and English.

In fact, from 0 to 4 years, this learner has been in a situation of communication with his parents as well as with his immediate surrounding (neighbourhood, crèche,

grocer...) exclusively in this language. French is his second language for two reasons:

The first is that this language is present in the child's auditory environment early. A child of four years old does not speak French but hears the others speak it, especially on T.V. This gives birth to a preliminary contact that, as the subject grows up, makes of French his second language.

The second reason is related to the fact that the subject is being taught French at the primary school as early as the fourth year. What has been noticed in this context is that when parents were, some years ago, given the choice to choose between French and English for their children at the primary school, their choice was in no way conclusive. We could thus assure that within the chronological order of the learning process, French is undoubtedly the second language at school.

English comes in the third position. Infact, the learner becomes acquainted with this language for the first time only when he is 12 or 13 years old, i.e three years after he had begun learning French. It is evident that out of an average of 50 students per class, there are two or three learners whose mother tongue is not Arabic and consequently, their linguistic profile does not correspond to the one we determined earlier in this paper. However, these cases remain insignificant in terms of number, something which allows us to keep the aforementioned profile as illustrative. We refer her to the students whose mother tongue is Tamazight.

Having tackled the aspect of the linguistic profile is certainly not the key issue of the present paper, but it

help considerably to understand the student and the way he uses English as a second foreign language.

Infact, the two remaining questions are closely related. The types of mistakes that recur in the student's writing and oral works are mainly of syntactic and semantic nature. Let us have a look at some of the most common errors found among first year students:

- 1/ He held his promise.
- 2/ He missed his promise.
- 3/ She was out of her.
- 4/ He has twenty years old.
- 5/ I will pass an exam tomorrow.
- 6/ The sun went.

We also find quite frequently mistakes such as:

- Café- future- superbe- magnifique- affaires- splendide.
- The use of to resume - to supply- to rest- to support.

Finally, we have:

- 1/ You have money-Have you money?
- 2/ The use of words like news, information, fish ...

A look at these examples clearly indicates that something goes wrong somewhere. A look at the students while writing them is class helps to understand quickly: students heavily rely on translation and the absence of a dictionary of English is clearly illustrative. Most of them use French-English or Arabic-English dictionaries. The thought is initially born in one of these two languages and the English words used to express it lose their ability

to convey the message of the student. Instead, the listener or the reader of such sentences or phrases either faces difficulties to get what he is supposed to understand and tries to read between the lines or understands something completely different from the original idea. Thus when a student says: "he kept his promise" or "he missed his promise", in fact, he wants to say " he kept his promise" or "he broke his promise". Here, the sentence, is syntactically correct. The learner knows the different parts of speech necessary to write a correct sentence and the order according to which these parts should be presented i.e subject verb + complement. The problem here is semantic. Although syntactically correct, this statement is not meaningful. This happened because the student thought in French and sought the English equivalents for the French words separately. Initially, the sentence is «Il a tenu sa promesse ». The same is applied for the second sentence: «Il a manqué à sa promesse». "He missed his promise", The interference of Arabic and French with English is also clear in the following examples:

- She was out of her, « Elle était hors d'elle » instead of « she was very angry » or “ She was beside herself with rage ».
- « He has twenty years old », « Il a vingt ans» instead of « he is twenty years old ».
- « I will pass an exam tomorrow », «Je vais passer un examen demain » instead of « I will sit for an exam tomorrow ».

Here the meaning is completely different. While the student's thought in French is to sit for an exam (the

result of the exam is not known yet), his sentence in English means he will succeed in this exam. The example of " the sun went " is the result of sentence in Arabic. Let us look at the following examples:

- « I had some café this morning », here the student uses the place when he wants to speak about the drink. French « café » corresponds to English «coffee ».
- « He resumed the important points of the lecture », « He could not support that -situation anymore ».

Here the student faces a problem of deceptive similarities between English and French equivalents. He uses « to resume » to mean « to summarize » and « to support » to mean « to bear ». For the student, the similarities in forms between « to resume » and « résumer » and between « to support » and « supporter » justify their use in this way. Similarly, the student uses words such as «Futur», «superbe», «magnifique», «affaires», «splendide», instead of futur - superb magnificent - affairs - splendid. The interference is also clear when we read: you have money - have you money? instead of : you have money. Do you have any money? Here the original sentence is either French or dialectal Arabic : « vous avez de l'argent. Ayez vous de l'argent?» Besides, some words like news, means, information, fish. ... are used both in the singular and plural forms because this is possible in Arabic or French, The student uses a new (singular) and news (plural) through interference with arabic from. The same thing has been noticed for the words «means»: a mean (singular), means (plural) as in French un moyen / des moyens, an « information ».

plural « informations ». « une information / des informations », « a fish/fishes » etc.

These are nothing but a few examples of some of the most common and recurrent errors first year students frequently fall into both in the writing and oral practice of English as second foreign language. A foreign language that enters the linguistic system of the learner only when two other languages have long been established. The interference between these three languages is a normal phenomenon as long as it appears rarely. When it becomes the basis for learning and practising a language, this is dangerous. The student who relies on translation does not manage to translate because this is completely another field that he does not master, nor does he acquire the new language correctly. All he does is to try to find a way in between the two languages that - he thinks - will enable him to progress in understanding and practising this language. It is deemed necessary today to encourage students to read in English from the first year, to encourage the use of English dictionaries rather than Arabic - English or French - English ones, to stress upon the combination syntax and semantics because these two are indissoluble. To achieve an appropriate learning process, students should primarily learn how to think in English.

References

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