

## **A Comparative and Contrastive Study of Prepositions in Arabic and English**

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### ***Abstract:***

*This study attempts a comparative and contrastive analysis of the subsystems of the prepositions in Arabic and English, in terms of their uses, function and meanings in order to find the major similarities and differences between Arabic and English and to account for any possible deviations that may characterize the performance of Arabic learners. The result showed that there are similarities and differences between these two subsystems of the prepositions in Arabic and English. The similarities between them facilitate the development process of learning a foreign language (positive transfer), whereas differences make learning process of a foreign language difficult and Arabic learners make many mistakes (negative transfer or interference). This study has pedagogical implications for teaching prepositions in English and to help teachers and motivate them to describe and analyze the learners' errors and also to prepare remedial exercises to eliminate the errors their students make in the use of prepositions.*

**Keywords:** *Prepositions, English, MSA, idiosyncrasies*

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## **Introduction**

Contrastive analysis (CA) is a crucial component of applied linguistics. It is concerned with the systematic comparison of two or more languages so as to describe the similarities and the differences. As applied linguistics focuses on finding solutions to language-related issues, CA seems to play a significant role in that regard mainly in the field of language teaching as it predicts and/or explains the difficulties of second or foreign language learning with a particular mother tongue in learning a particular target language. CA assumes that a comparison and contrast on different language levels (phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical and cultural) make it possible to identify the points of difference which constitute a difficulty and hence this would have important implications for language teaching. This argument is well stated by Fries:

"The most efficient materials are those that are based upon scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner" (1945: 9).

As it is mentioned above, CA includes different language levels including the culture (Lado 1957), however, James (1980) has focused on what has been called microlinguistic contrastive analysis, i.e. an analysis of phonology, grammar and syntax.

The main purpose of this paper is to make a contrastive and a comparative analysis of prepositions in Arabic and English so as to see to what extent they are similar and/or different. This analysis addresses, among other things, the complexity issue of learning prepositions for Arab students of English. After that, the research provides some pedagogical implications

It is important to note that 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. As a consequence, it is not surprising that there are a lot of divergences between the two languages.

### **1-Morphological description of both English and Arabic Prepositions**

#### **1-1-English prepositions**

Prepositions are words that are used before a noun to show place, position, and time. They can be classified morphologically in complex and simple prepositions.

Simple prepositions: such as on, in, at. For example:

A great fear came on him.

Until white Fang could only cry and yelp in pain

He pointed at the cup.

Complex prepositions: such as out of, etc

Your consult will be out of date

Also, prepositions can be can be classified according to their function:

Prepositions of time: such as in, after

I graduated from New Haven in 1915.

After boasting this way of my tolerance.

Prepositions of place: such as on, into  
The ground hit him hard on the nose  
.....and into his air.

## 1-2-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, destination, direction of motion, time, manner and so on.

Arab grammarians used to classify Arabic words into three categories: ?smaa, ?afaal and huruf, which are nouns, verbs and particles respectively. From the class of huruf, "particles" the Arab grammarians separated prepositions which they call huruf ?al-jarr, that is "particles of attraction."

Traditional Arabic prepositions are divided into two morphological classes: 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. For example:

قال البقال لمصطفى-

/kala ?al bakal li Mostapha/

Said-the grocer-noun to Mostapha-acc

2-/nal?abu bi ?al ?aldzi/

Play we-nom by the snow

We play by the snow

The second class consists of prepositions which are independent and either bilateral or trilateral. These are separable.

Bilateral : for example

خرج خالد من الدار

/xaradzā xalidu min ?al ddari

Gets out-Khalid-nom of home-acc

Khaled gets out of home.

بقي خالد في الدار

/bakiya xalidu fi: ?al ddari/

Stayed khaled-nom at home-acc

Khaled stayed at home

Trilateral: for example:

ليلى تروح الى المدرسة

/Leila truhu ?ilaa ?al madrasati/

Leila-nom goes to school

Leila is going to school

خرج مع أبي منذ الصباح

/xaradzā ma?a abi munðu ?al sabah

Went out he-nom with father-nom my-genitive since the morning.

He went out with my father since the morning

## 2-Analysis of prepositions in English and Arabic: Comparison and Contrast

### 2-1-Similarities

#### Function of prepositions in Arabic and English

Prepositions in English are used to connect a noun and another noun grammatically or a noun to a noun phrase to show the relation between the two nouns. For example:

There is a small annex in the hospital.

The flush on his checks.

In examples (1) and (2) the prepositions in and on show the relation between noun and a noun phrase annex and the hospital, and the flush and his checks. The prepositions on and in join a noun to another noun or a noun to a noun phrase.

Similarly, in Arabic the preposition is used to connect a noun to another noun grammatically to show the relation between them. For example:

بقي خالد في الدار

/bakiya xalidu fi: ?al ddari/

Stayed-Khaled-nom at home-acc

Khaled stayed at home

In the above example, the preposition /fi:/ is used to connect two nouns /xalidu/ and /?al ddari/. So, the preposition /fi:/ joins a noun to another noun.

Prepositions in English are also to connect the verb and the noun grammatically to show the relation between them. For example:

He stepped off the bank.

In this example, the preposition off shows the relation between the actions expressed by the verb stepped and the bank, the preposition off joins a noun to a verb.

Similarly, in Arabic the preposition is used to connect a verb and a noun. It helps a transitive verb to pass over its object. For example:

ذهبت بخالد

/ ðahbtu bixalid/

Went I-nom with Khaled-acc

I went with Khaled.

In this example, the preposition /bi/ shows the relation between the verb and the noun. The preposition /bi/ joins a noun to a verb.

#### Position of prepositions in English and Arabic

In English, the prepositions occur in the middle of the sentence before a singular or plural noun, i.e. S+V+prep+N (pl, sing). For example:

I lived at West Egg

He looked at the babes of the sea

In the first example, the preposition at occurs before a singular noun and after a plural noun in the second example.

Similarly, in Arabic the preposition occurs in the middle of the sentence before the noun (be it singular, dual, masculine plural, feminine plural). For example:

خرج مصطفى من الدار

/xaradz̤a mustafa mina ʔal daari/

Went out Mostapha-nom of the home-acc

Mostapha went out of the home

In English, the preposition occurs in the middle of the sentence before a pronoun, i.e. S+V+Prep+Pr. For example

"will you go?" said my wife looking across at me

In the above example, the preposition at occurs before the pronoun me.

Similarly, in Arabic the preposition occurs in the middle of the sentence before a noun, i.e. S+V+Prep+Pr. For example

/ʔaxrudzu ʔilaiha/

Get out I-nom to her-acc

I get out to her

In this example, the preposition /ʔila/ occurs before the pronoun her.

## Meaning and Uses of prepositions in English and Arabic

### Preposition of place

In English there are some prepositions which denote a place such as: to, at. For example:

I must go to the West of England.

I took dinner usually at the Yale Club.

Similarly, in Arabic there are some prepositions which denote places such as /min/, /fi:/, /ʔila/. For example:

خرج خالد من الدار

/xaradz̤a xali:du min ʔal ddari/

Gets out Khaled-nom of the home-acc

Khaled gets out of home

بقي يلعب في الطريق

/bakiya yalʔabu fi: ʔal tariki/

Stayed he-nom playing in the road-acc

He stayed plying in the road

خرج إلى الدار

/radzaʔa ʔila ʔal ddari/

Came back he-nom home-acc

He came back home

### Preposition of Time

In English there are some prepositions which denote time such as in, after, etc

Was a Methodist minister who died in 1880.

After the Red Badge of Courage.

Similarly, in Arabic there are some prepositions which denote time such as /hatta/

حتى أحبته قريش-

/hatta ?ahbabthu kureiʃ/

Until loved him-acc Koreish-nom

Until Koreish loved him

2-2-The differences

Functions of Prepositions in Arabic and English

Prepositions in English are used to connect a noun and an adjective grammatically to show the relation between them. For example:

-If he was tied to Grey Beaver.

In this example, the preposition to shows the relation between the adjective tied and the proper noun Grey Beaver. So, the preposition to joins a noun to an adjective. However, in Arabic, the preposition does not connect a noun and an adjective.

Arabic prepositions have a distinctive feature. It affects the last vowel of the word, whether it is short or long, by changing it to a short vowel known as kasrah /i/. for example:

مصطفى في المزرعة

/mustafa fi: ?al mazraʔti/

Mustapha-nom in the farm

Mustapha is in the farm

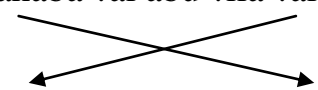
But, in English this characteristic does not exist.

Position of Prepositions in English and Arabic

In Arabic, the preposition can be put at the beginning of the sentence before a noun by changing the word order in the sentence, i.e. S+Prep+N= Prep+N+S. For example:

ذهب الأب إلى المسجد-

-/ ðahaba ?al abu ?ila ?al masdzidi/

  
/?ila ?al masdzidi ðahaba ?al abu/

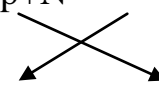
-To the mosque-acc went the father-nom

- The father went to the mosque

In this example, the preposition /?ila/ occurs before a noun at the beginning of the sentence. But in English it is not possible to put the preposition of the sentence before a noun by changing the word order of the sentence. For example:

John went to school

S+V + Prep+N



Prep+N + S+V

\*to school went Ahmed

In English, prepositions occur before -ing verb form (gerund), prep+ -ing-V  
After boasting this way of my tolerance

However in Arabic, prepositions do not occur before a verb.

Another point of difference lies in the fact that in English, prepositions can occur at the end of the sentence which is not the case in Arabic. For example:

It is very small things that I always look for.

It is a terrible thing for her to live with

Meaning and Uses of Prepositions in English and Arabic

/munðu/ in Arabic and since in English. /munðu/ is an Arabic preposition used to denote time. Similarly, in English the preposition since denotes time as well. However, the difference between the two lies in the fact that /munðu/ is used in the present and the past time, whereas since is used in the present perfect. For example:

خرجت منذ الصباح

/xaradztu munðu ?al sabah/

Went out I-nom since the morning

I went out since the morning

In the above example, /munðu/ denotes the past time in Arabic. But in English since denotes the present perfect. For example:

I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

In this example; since refers to the time in the present perfect continuous.

In English, there are some prepositions which occur as conjunctions such as: before, after, since. For example:

Why did he use it before he saw you?

But in Arabic, there is no preposition that can occur as a conjunction.

3-Suggestions for a more effective teaching of English Prepositions to Arab EFL learners

Before providing proposals for a more effective teaching of English prepositions to Arab ELF learners, it is necessary to have a look at the different types of errors committed by Arab learners of English.

Generally speaking, errors involving the use of English by Arab EFL learners of English 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 is required. Omission errors mean that a word was left out where necessary.

e.g. Substitution errors

\*In the third day, \*think in

Redundant errors:

\*I feel with happy, \*Judge on things

Omission errors:

\*he came on Monday, \*I was born 22nd of May, 1986

McCarthy (1972) strongly believes that as any English language teachers recognizes very well how much prepositions are troublesome for non-native speakers and of course Arab learners are no exception. Therefore, it is fundamental for

teachers to devise an effective syllabus that deals seriously with the issues of prepositions.

Indeed, prepositions in English are a major problem for Arab learners of English because they are fewer in Arabic and their use differs greatly as it was shown in this study. The following suggestions were provided by McCarthy (1972) for more effective teaching of prepositions for Arab learners of English:

One way to teach English prepositions could be to take the most common committed mistakes in their usage while writing in English and to teach a group of three or four prepositions simultaneously. It is more preferable to start with expressions that have a parallel expression in the students' mother tongue. One group would be: share with, cope with, confer with. Another: 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 one group per day. Provide many sentences for each expression and have students give their own by combining two or more expressions: I called up Ahmed, after I got up from my nap and looked up his phone number.

Next, introduce different expressions that are similar in structure and meaning, explain the difference and give examples for each. Take for instance, on time, in time, at 8 o'clock. Combine them in one sentence: if you come to class on time, in time, i.e. at 8 o'clock, you will in time develop a good habit.

After that, every once in a while write on the board verbs that students have learned: get....., look....., take....., and have them insert preposition that goes with each verb, and then use these expressions in full 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. Finally, make sure that students have the opportunity to do some activities such as crossed puzzles to vary the producers and maybe to make them more 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 more effectively.

### Conclusion

As a conclusion, it is quite safe to say that prepositions are really problematic for Arab learners of English as a second and/or a foreign language as most of these prepositions have different functions and used which make it even harder for the students to use the correct form. Furthermore, the findings of this analytical study have shown that differences and similarities between Arabic and English proved that each language has specific rule governance as well as its own idiosyncrasies. Consequently, both teachers and learners of English should be aware of these differences in order to avoid potential problems when producing utterances in English.



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