

## THE INTERLINGUAL ERRORS OF ARAB STUDENTS IN THE USE OF ENGLISH BINOMIALS

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### ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the interlingual errors made by adult Arab learners in the use of the English binomials. Thus, it adds one more area to those where language transfer has been reported. A total of 73 binomials were collected from the oral and written presentation of the second year university students majoring in English. The incorrect binomials (85%) could all be attributed to negative transfer from Arabic. These were grouped and analyzed under three main categories: grammatical errors, lexical errors, and Arabic specific binomials. The findings of this study need to be confirmed by further investigation. The study concludes with pedagogical recommendations that need to be empirically verified.

## أخطاء التأثير السلبي للغة الأولى لدى الطلاب العرب في استعمال المتلازمات الإنجليزية

### ملخص

تلقي هذه الدراسة الضوء على الأخطاء التي يرتكبها الطلاب العرب في استعمال المتلازمات الإنجليزية نتيجة التأثير السلبي للغة الأولى ، وبذلك تضيف هذه الدراسة مجالاً آخر لتلك المجالات التي لاحظ فيها الباحثون ذلك التأثير . جمع الباحث 73 متلازمة إنجليزية من عروض شفوية وتحريرية أداها طلاب عرب بالسنة الثانية في تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية بالمرحلة الجامعية وبالحرص والتحليل تبين أن معظم الأخطاء (85%) في تلك المتلازمات كانت ناتجة عن النقل السلبي من اللغة العربية وتنقسم إلى ثلاثة أنواع : أخطاء نحوية وأخطاء مفردات ومتلازمات خاصة باللغة العربية . تختتم الدراسة بتوصيات تدريبية يجب التحقق من فعاليتها عن طريق بحوث تجريبية كما يجب التحقق من نتائج هذا البحث عموماً بالمزيد من التحاليل لأخطاء الطلاب في استعمال المتلازمات الإنجليزية .

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### **The Transfer Strategy:**

Both competent speakers and learners of a language commit performance mistakes due to psycho-physiological reasons such as fatigue, sickness, divided attention, quick writing or speaking. The learner's language (i.e. inter-language), however, shows signs of incomplete learning commonly known as competence 'errors', (Brown, 1994; James, 1998; Johnson, 1988; Michaelides, 1990). Hence, the main reason behind language learners' errors is incomplete learning; their inter-language is somewhere along the continuum from zero to full competence. The learners have gaps in their linguistic knowledge that need to be filled in by more learning. A major learning strategy is language transfer. Falling back on the psychological principle of making use of already learned skills to learn new ones, learners transfer from their previous linguistic knowledge to fill in the gaps in the target language. Foreign language learners have their first language as well as their inter-language to draw upon; they depend on inter-lingual as well as intralingual transfer. Thus, these two types of transfer are linguistic strategies whereby learners attempt to facilitate the task of learning and using the target language.

### **Transfer of Binomials:**

The effect of the use of these linguistic strategies may not be easy to detect since the production of correct as well as incorrect language forms could also be attributed to other factors such as rote memorization and subconscious acquisition. However, the negative effects of inter-lingual transfer may be fairly easily discernible in case of

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pronunciation. In fact, inter-lingual transfer errors have been observed at all linguistic levels, (see e.g. Gass and Selinker, 1994; Mahmoud, 1999; Odlin, 1989; Ringbom, 1992). Evidence for the pervasiveness of negative inter-lingual transfer is believed to be indisputable specially in foreign language (FL) learning contexts where the learners' exposure to the language is confined to few hours per week of formal classroom instruction, (Gass and Selinker, 1983; Odlin, 1989; Ringbom, 1987). Low proficiency level in the FL motivates language transfer, (see also Giacobbe, 1992; Khanji, 1996; Si-Qing, 1990).

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the inter-lingual transfer of the English binomials by Arab students. It is hypothesized that in foreign language learning contexts, the transfer strategy is used to carry over the features of the binomials of the first language. As in many other linguistic areas (e.g. vocabulary, structure, etc.) a remarkable portion of errors in binomials could, among other factors, be attributed to inter-lingual transfer. Since no studies have so far been conducted in the area of binomials to the best of the present writer's knowledge, this study adds one more area to those where inter-lingual transfer has been reported. Few researchers investigated Arab students' errors in using idiomatic expressions in English (e.g. Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989; Mahmoud, 2002). However, these studies do not cover binomials as a type of fixed expressions. In this study the term 'binomial' is used to refer to an irreversible sequence of two words explicitly or implicitly joined by a conjunction or a preposition, (see also Martinez, 1999). The two words in a binomial could be synonyms (e.g. far ad away), antonyms (e.g. dead or alive), identical (e.g. miles and miles), sequential (e.g. wash and wear), or correlative (e.g. soap and water).

**Empirical Data:**

Data for this study were gathered from the oral and written English of 60 third and fourth semester Arabic-speaking male and female university students majoring in English in the colleges of Arts and Education. These students had been studying English for 11 or 12 years in classroom contexts. They were not taught English binomials in any systematic manner. Due to the small number of male students, the sex variable was taken into account. Binomials were collected from guided and free written summaries, paragraphs and essays, and from free and guided oral presentations in general English courses. Of course, not every student used binomials in each task. A total of 73 binomials were recorded. As mentioned earlier, correct production of these binomials could be due, among other factors, to positive interlingual transfer since the corresponding Arabic binomials are semantically and structurally identical to the English ones as in:

**English****Arabic**

Before and after

( قبل وبعد )

Black and white

( أسود وأبيض )

Here and there

( هنا وهناك )

Right and wrong

( الصح والخطأ )

Question and answer

( سؤال وجواب )

Wait and see

( اصبر وشوف )

In and out

( داخل وخارج )

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<b>Categories</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>1. Grammatically or Lexically incorrect</b>	31	50
(a) Grammatically incorrect (26 i.e. 42%)		
(I) Reverse order (11 i.e. 42%)		
(II) Use of article (10 i.e. 38%)		
(III) Omission of connector		
(b) Lexically incorrect ( 5 i.e. 8%)		
<b>2. Arabic-specific binomials incorrectly transferred</b>	31	50
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100</b>

The table above shows that 62 (85%) binomials were incorrect and these could be divided into two main categories:

1. Grammatically or lexically incorrect (31 i.e. 50%)
2. Arabic-specific binomials incorrectly transferred (31 i.e. 50%)

The grammatical errors (26 i.e. 42%) were far more than the lexical once (5 i.e. 8%). This could be due to the fact that many English binomials are also found in Arabic with some grammatical differences. The following three types of grammatical errors were detected:

(1) Reversing the order: (11 errors, 42%)

Binomials are a type of fixed expressions, hence the order of the connected words is, in most cases, irreversible. Some of

Binomials are a type of fixed expressions, hence the order of the connected words is, in most cases, irreversible. Some of the semantically shared binomials in English and Arabic are structurally in the reverse order. For instance, the equivalent of the English binomial 'needle and thread' is in Arabic 'thread and needle'. The following are example of mis-ordering errors:

- Between me and you ( بيني وبينك )
- Take and give ( خذ وهات )
- Water and soap ( الماء والصابون )
- I and you ( أنا وأنت )
- Groom and bride ( العريس والعروس )
- Sweet and bitter ( حلوومر )

(2) Use of the definite article: (10 errors, 38%)

In Arabic, the definite article is used before generic and abstract nouns. Inter-lingual transfer of the Arabic structure may have led to the insertion of 'the' in English as in the following examples:

- the life and death ( الحياة والموت )
- the profit and the loss ( الربح والخسارة )
- the war and the piece ( الحرب والسلام )
- the love and marriage ( الحب والزواج )
- the crime and the punishment ( الجريمة والعقاب )

(3) Omission of the connector (5 errors, 19%)

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There are cases where English uses a connector but Arabic may or may not use one. The following errors reflect the Arabic structure:

- up down ( فوق وتحت )
- hot humid ( حار ورطب )
- morning evening ( صباح ومساء )
- step step ( خطوة خطوة )
- one one ( واحد واحد )

Compared to the grammatical errors (42%), the lexical ones were very few (8%) and they were due to incorrect rendering of some Arabic words in the corresponding binomials. The five errors found were:

- fun and playing (=fund and games) ( لهُو ولعب )
- sky and earth (=heaven and earth) ( السماء والأرض )
- meat and blood (=flesh and blood) ( لحم ودم )
- spirit and body (=body and soul) ( الروح والجسد )
- head to foot (=head to toe) ( من الرأس إلى القدم )

Half of the incorrect binomials (31 i.e. 50%) were due to the transfer of the Arabic specific ones; the binomials that are found in Arabic but not in English. Of course, as in any language, Arabic has its own language and culture specific binomials. Such binomials are always at the tip of the tongue of Arabic speakers. Hence students of English tend to translate them into English. Translation of these Arabic-



specific binomials often lead to comprehension problems. Even native speakers of Arabic may need to consult the students to understand some of these incorrect binomials.

- foot and leg ( قدم وساق )
- tie and untie ( الحل والربط )
- turning and circling ( لف ودوران )
- lion or hyena ( سبع أم ضبع ؟ )
- the eye and the head ( العين والرأس )
- the brother and the friend ( الأخ والصديق )
- cold and safe ( برداً وسلاماً )
- Zayd and Obayd ( زيد وعبيد )
- Dream or knowledge ( حلم أم علم ؟ )

#### **Conclusion and Implication:**

This article sheds light on the inter-lingual errors of Arab-speaking university students in the use of the English binomials, an area which has, so far, not been investigated. The lack of studies in this area could be attributed to the fact that Arab learners of English usually express themselves in plain non-idiomatic English. However, compared to idioms and phrasal verbs, binomials are more frequently used because they are, in most cases, endocentric and more frequently used in standard and non-standard Arabic. The correct production of some binomials (15%) by these students could be due to memorization, subconscious acquisition or positive transfer from their first language. The

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incorrect ones (85%) could, among other reasons, be attributed to negative inter-lingual transfer.

From a pedagogical point of view, the first language (L1) could be used as an inoculation against its own negative effects. Since inter-lingual transfer is a major learning and communication strategy, specially in foreign language (FL) learning situations, the use of L1 in FL teaching is in line with the learners tendency to make use of their mother tongue in formulating hypotheses about the FL. Adult learners could be presented with a brief and clear account of the role L1 in FL learning with the aim of arousing their interest in knowing one of the main strategies underlying their errors and non-errors, (see also Atkinson, 1987; Mahmoud, 1997, 1998; Marton, 1988; Ringbom, 1987; Rubin, 1987).

Open discussion of the similarities and differences between binomials in L1 and the FL with examples of cases of positive and negative transfer may help students know when to transfer and when not to. Informal discussions with some teachers and students revealed that bilingual word lists at the end of some language course books are useful. However, meaning of words change depending on context of use, hence such valuable space could be spared for bilingual lists of fixed expression such as binomials and idioms. It might be useful to provide students with lists of English binomials including:

1. binomials that are structurally and semantically equivalent to those of L1.
2. binomials that are semantically identical to but structurally different from those of L1.
3. the most common English -specific binomials.

These steps are intended to counteract the effects of negative transfer from the mother tongue in using the English binomials. For more tips on teaching binomials in general the reader may see, for example, Martinez (1999).

Needless to say, further research is needed before any significant use could be made of the present findings. Similar studies need to be carried out not only with different groups of adult Arab learners but also with learners of English from different L1 backgrounds. Empirical evidence in favor of the usefulness of contrastive comparisons (e.g. Lott, 1993; Mahmoud, 1997) needs to be confirmed by further experimentation. The usefulness of bilingual lists of binomials remains to be empirically verified.

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