

The Translation of Tense and Aspect from English into Arabic by Moroccan Undergraduates: Difficulties and Solutions

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Abstract

The English tense and aspect systems have always been a problematic issue in translation, especially when a language as discrepant as Arabic is involved. Novice translators, as it is the case with university students, face difficulties in finding equivalent translations for tense and aspect either in Arabic or in English. More specifically, Moroccan learners not only find difficulty in translating the English present perfect- in both its simple and progressive reflexes- into Arabic, but they also fail to choose the correct equivalent English tense for the Arabic perfect and imperfect aspects. Building on some studies conducted mainly by Arab researchers (such as Bouras, 1999; Al-Fallay, 1999; Sekhri, 2009; Reishaan and Ja'far ,2008; Kechoud, 2010; Mansour, 2011; and Abu Joudeh et al, 2013) who dealt with almost the same issue, this study describes some of the errors made by Moroccan undergraduate students in the area of tense-aspect translation. To achieve this, 63 Moroccan undergraduate university students were tested. The test was analysed carefully and the results we have achieved so far justified our claims. This study also tries to provide an explanation for the problem, as well as suggest some solutions.

Keywords: Arabic, aspect, English, tense, translation

Introduction

The act of translating is not an easy process at all. It involves a variety of techniques and much awareness of a number of aspects on the part of the translator. Cultural background in the Target Language (TL), familiarity with native speakers' behaviours, mastery of both languages involved, familiarity with their syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and discourse components are all elements the translator needs to take into account. Since grammatical constructions embody certain meaning, they should be translated carefully so as not to communicate a wrong aspect of the message, especially when both the Source Language (SL) and the (TL) are highly discrepant. In relation to this, Aziz and Muftah (2000: 90) say that "cross-cultural translation may constitute many problematic areas. This is true of translation between English, which represents part of the western culture, and Arabic, which belongs to the oriental culture."

Generally speaking, the kinds of errors made in translation by Moroccan undergraduate university students are due to several factors. However, tense and aspect seem to be the cause of many inaccuracies in translation papers. Differences in the linguistic form between Standard Arabic and English are the main factor in this respect. English and Arabic are totally different in their tense-aspect systems in terms of both number and meaning. English has twelve tenses which result from a combination between tense and aspect. Arabic, on the other hand, has only two aspects: the perfect and the imperfect. Moreover, the approaches these learners adopt in translating aspects seem to be inadequate due to the lack of awareness of how the system works in English in particular. Moreover, it can be deduced that the kind of errors made are due to some deficiencies in the learning and the teaching practices as well.

Based on these gaps, we have decided to investigate this area of research to show the problems that exist as well as to suggest some solutions.

Methodology

In an attempt to provide concrete examples of translation problems concerning this area of tense and aspect, a test was assigned to semester 2 students of the English department at the Faculty of Letters at Ibn Tofail University- Kenitra, Morocco during the academic year 2013-2014. 63 students, 24 males and 39 females aged between 18 and 27, were tested. The test is in the form of a number of items (separate sentences) to be translated either into English or into Arabic. Half of the students (32) worked on the Arabic translation and the other half (31) worked on the English translation. After collecting the test, it was subjected to statistical analysis through which we classified all students' errors together with the tenses used in each sentence separately in both the Arabic and English translation. Then, we compared the results to the answers/ tenses supposedly to be used. The objective behind adopting such method is to see to what extent Moroccan undergraduate students succeed in recognizing the target tense-aspect either in Arabic or in English. Moreover, it is an effective tool upon which we relied to detect the problem. Hence, all our analysis is built upon the results of this test.

The target population

Our target population is homogeneous in terms of linguistic, cultural and educational background. Firstly, these learners speak the same native language, Moroccan Arabic, and all of them come from the Gharb Chrarda Bni Hssen region. Thus, they share the same culture. Secondly, these students have studied English for at least four years (the year in which the test was assigned is included). They are classified as B1 according to the common European reference levels. Moreover, they have already been exposed to a grammar course in semester 1 in

which they studied/ reviewed all the tenses and aspects of English. Generally speaking, these students have gone through the same formal educational system. In other words, before majoring in English at the university level, they have already studied Standard Arabic, as one of the subjects, in primary school, middle school, and high school for 12 years minimum. Thus, they have a mastery of this language.

The English studies program

As far as the English studies program is concerned, Ibn Tofail University students are exposed to different subject matters during the three years of the program. Translation is one of the courses students study during these three years. It comes under different names as students proceed from one semester to another. In semester 3, for instance, the course is called *Initiation to Translation*. In semester 4, it is called *Translation (Arabic-English-Arabic)*, and in semester 5 it is called *Advanced Multilingual Translation*. Only linguistic option students receive this course in semester 5. Objectives of the course differ from one semester to another. Taking the students' level into consideration, the objectives for the translation course in semester 3, for instance, come as follow:

- 1- To enable students make sense of the process of translation and motivation underlying the importance of translating
- 2- To introduce students to the nature of transition from source language to target language
- 3- To enable students know and deal with the different language and cultural elements involved in the process of translation
- 4- To make students aware of the major problems and challenges of translating words and texts
- 5- To train students to properly translate such culturally specific constructs as idiomatic expressions

(Adopted from the official course description)

The course also involves grammatical aspects of translating sentences. However, Our target population were given the test on translation not only because it is a course they will have, but also because translation is a method they tend to rely on at this level while dealing with English structures, especially in grammar course.

Data analysis

After collecting it, the data was subjected to statistical analysis. To start with, the English translation of the test requires the use of the tenses below with the frequency rates shown in table 1:

Table 1. English tenses whose use is required by the test along with their frequency

<i>Tense</i>	<i>f.</i>	<i>%</i>
Present progressive	2	20 %
Present perfect	6	60 %
Present perfect progressive	2	20 %
Total	10	100%

Evidently, much focus is put on the present perfect (60 % of the answers). This tense is claimed (cf. the references cited above in the abstract) as being the most problematic tense for Arab learners in general. The answers of the test's population reflect this fact. The frequencies in table 2 show the kind of tenses students opted for.

Table 2. Frequency of the tenses used by students

<i>Tense</i>	<i>f.</i>	<i>%</i>
Simple present	94	30,51 %
Present progressive	53	17,20 %
Present perfect	50	16,23 %
Present perfect progressive	17	5,51 %
Simple past	65	21,10 %
Past progressive	1	0,32 %
Wrong forms	23	7,46%
No answer	5	1,62 %
Total	308	100 %

This table shows that Moroccan students favour simple forms (the simple aspect) as it is manifested by their use of simple present (30,52%) and simple past (21,10%) which are not valid at all as answers. This, in fact, justifies Nabil's (2007, n.p) manifestations as far as intralingual errors are concerned. Nabil lists some errors that Arab learners make among which the use of simple structures instead of complex ones, the use of a structure where it does not apply, and the avoidance of difficult structures. In addition to this, the present perfect which is supposed to be used by (60%) out of the total answers was only used by (16,23%). The table also shows that students seem to be familiar with the use of the present progressive since (17,20%) out of (20%) of the answers were achieved. Surprisingly, the progressive seems to be problematic for these Moroccan learners when it is combined together with the perfect aspect as it is the case with the present perfect progressive. These students failed to associate both aspects together in their translation since only (5,51%) out of (20%) of the answers were provided. One can conclude that the present perfect is really a problem for Moroccan learners. As a result, they overuse the simple present tense. Moreover, these learners find it hard to both perceive and use in combination the progressive and the perfective aspects to come up with the present perfect progressive tense.

Translating into Arabic requires the use of the perfect and the imperfect; the only aspects that exist in this language. Answers, then, should come as follow:

Table 3. Frequency of aspects supposedly to be used in Arabic

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>f.</i>	<i>%</i>
Perfect	4	40%
Imperfect	6	60%
Total	10	100 %

Again, the range of answers the students provided shows a number of problems. Table 4 illustrates students' answers.

Table 4. Frequency of students' answers in Arabic translation

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>f.</i>	<i>%</i>
Perfect	157	49,06 %
Imperfect	129	40,31 %
Other forms	19	5,93 %
Wrong forms	8	2,5 %
Wrong translation	3	0,93 %
No answer	4	1,25 %
Total	320	100 %

The data in table 4 reveals that students have generated a variety of answers and sometimes no answers at all for the forms they had. This fact proclaims that there is a real problem. Moroccan students struggle to come up with an equivalent translation to the English sentences- To illustrate, table 5 shows the kind of aspect students used to translate sentence 1.

1) I have been waiting for the bus since nine o'clock.

Table 5. Aspects used by students for sentence 1

Form	Perfect	/qad+perfect/ /la-qad/ +perfect	Imperfect	Other forms
<i>N.</i>	6	3	15	6
<i>Total</i>	9		15	6

Tackling such a sentence that uses both the perfect and the progressive aspects together is really difficult for Moroccan students to translate. Some of these students considered the sentence to be in the present tense. Thus, they have used the imperfect. Others considered it to be in the past tense. As a result, they have used either the bare perfect /i-ntadar-tu انتظرت / or the perfect preceded by the particle /qad قد / or /la-qad لقد / as (/la-qad/i-ntadar-tu لقد انتظرت). Other students find this structure more complex. Thus, they have formulated some forms which do not fit the context at all. Examples of these forms are: /kuntu + the imperfect كنت أنتظر / or /la-qad+ kuntu+ the imperfect لقد كنت أنتظر /. To a lesser degree, sentence 2 reveals the same fact. See table 6.

2) I have been working here for some days now.

Table 6. Aspects used by students for sentence 2

Form	Perfect	/qad+perfect/ /la-qad/ +perfect	Imperfect	Other forms
<i>N.</i>	5	3	20	3
<i>Total</i>	8		20	3

If we compare the answers for sentence 2 and those for sentence 1, we notice that Moroccan students show more preference for the imperfect over the perfect form. This time, the adverbial 'now' plays a major role in influencing students' answers. Similarly, the English translation shows a preference for the use of simple present and present progressive. See table 7.

Table 7. English tenses used by students for sentence 2

Tense	Simple	Present	Present	Present	Simple	Wrong	No

	present	progressive	perfect	perfect progressive	past	forms	answer
N.	13	7	3	5	0	2	1

The Arabic imperfect is a source of mother tongue interference as it is evident from the students' choice of the English tense. Moroccan students tend to consider the imperfect as an equivalent to the English present simple or present progressive and the perfect as an equivalent to simple past.

Another striking fact is that Moroccan learners use both the Arabic perfect and imperfect as equivalents to the English present perfect. Following McCawley (1971), Comrie (1976), and Binnick (1991), the English present perfect can be seen within these four categories:

- 1) Universal perfect/ perfect of continuity. e.g., *I have known him since 1999.*
- 2) Experiential perfect. e.g., *I have visited Paris three times before.*
- 3) The perfect of result. e.g., *Sarah has done six exercises up to now.*
- 4) The perfect of recent past. e.g., *He has just gone out.*

The data gathered from the test reveals that Moroccan learners tend to use simple past in English and the perfect in Arabic to refer to experiential perfect, perfect of result, and perfect of recent past. However, to refer to universal perfect, they tend to use simple present in English and the imperfect in Arabic. Tables 8, 9, 10, and 11 illustrate this fact:

A) Perfect of result

- 3) Sarah has done six exercises up to now.

Table 8. Arabic aspects used by students for sentence 3

Form	Perfect	/qad+perfect/ /la-qad/+perfect	imperfect	Other forms
N.	26	3	0	3
Total	29		0	3

B) Perfect of recent past

- 4) He has just gone out.

Table 9. Arabic aspects used by students for sentence 4

Form	perfect	/qad+perfect/ /la-qad/+perfect	Imperfect	Other forms	Wrong forms	No answer
N.	6	24	0	0	1	1
Total	30		0	0	1	1

C) Experiential perfect

- 5) I have visited Paris three times before.

Table 10. Arabic aspects used by students for sentence 5

Form	Perfect	/qad+perfect/ /la-qad/+perfect	Imperfect	Other forms	Wrong form	No answer
N.	16	15	0	0	1	0

Total	31	0	0	1	0
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In all of these cases, students chose the perfect aspect. However, one should notice which form of the Arabic perfect is really used in translating these sentences into Arabic. In some cases the bare perfect is used more as in (sentence 3), in other cases the construction (/la-/qad/+ perfect) is used more as in (sentence 4), and in some other cases both bare perfect and (/la-/qad/+ perfect) are equally used as in (sentence 5). To what extent can we accept that all sentences describing perfect of result should be translated by using bare perfect, that all sentences *describing* recent past should be translated by the use of /la-/qad/ + perfect, and that sentences describing experiential perfect can be translated either by bare perfect or /la-/qad/ + perfect? In fact, this inconsistency of using (/la-/qad/ +perfect) hints that there is a problem. Moroccan students do not really know when to use only the bare perfect and when to precede it by the particle /la-/qad/. May be future research will provide more answers to this point.

D) Universal perfect/ or perfect of continuity

- 6) I have known him since 1999.

Table 11. The Arabic aspects used by students for sentence 6

Form	Perfect	/qad+perfect/ /la-qad/ +perfect	Imperfect	Other forms	Wrong form	No answer
N.	1	0	24	2	5	0
Total	1	0	24	2	5	0

Normally, most foreign English language learners find difficulty in distinguishing between the present perfect and simple past. Surprisingly, in the case of universal perfect, the translation into English reveals a confusion between the present perfect and simple present as it is shown by the table 12.

Table 12. The tenses used by students for the English translation of sentence 6

Tense	Simple present	Present progressive	Present perfect	Present perfect progressive	Simple past	Wrong forms	No answer
N.	15	0	14	0	2	0	0

This also justifies our claim that there is an interference of the Arabic imperfect into English. In fact, based on the test’s analysis, one can say that the source of these problems is both interlingual and intralingual. We agree with Kohn (1986) who assumes that facing two different structures in two different languages result in interference (Abu-Joudeh et al (2013:46). Similarly, we totally agree with Mattar’s (2001: 104) interpretation that students avoid using complex structures such as the present perfect because they are unable to “establish proper form-meaning / tense-aspect associations.”

Possible solutions

Tense-aspect problems can be resolved by the means of a variety of measures and treatments. In fact, Sekhri (2009) suggests that the context is the key element upon which one should rely on to come up with an equivalent translation of the present perfect and that

translation should be oriented towards meaning. We argue that the matter involves more than this and that different components should be integrated to come up with an effective solution. Linguistic variation awareness, cultural awareness, the teaching practice, and the learning behaviour all play a major role here. Moroccan learners should be trained on the linguistic variations that exist among languages. In this respect, comparative studies should be given much importance to help students see the facets of difference between the SL and the TL. In addition to this, these learners need to develop culture awareness in language learning. That is to say, they should be familiar with native speakers of the TL and how this language is used in real life situations. Culture should always remain an essential component in translation. In stressing the role of culture in translation, Nida (1985) states,

One of the most important approaches to translation is the socio-semiotic or cultural approach which means that translation is not restricted to the meanings of sounds, words, grammar, and rhetoric but it goes beyond mere correspondences to cultural presuppositions and value systems which create a different world picture specific to every culture. P.121

In this regard, cultural studies are of great help in raising students' cultural awareness. The teaching practice should also be reviewed. For example, grammar teachers should step away from teaching grammatical items out of context and giving exhaustive explanations of the TL rules. As far as tense and aspect are concerned, teachers should focus more on teaching the meaning and function of these aspects using authentic materials. In this regard, Bouras (1999: 174) claims that instructors need "to look for the function of the verbs within the text rather than relying simply on decontextualized meanings." In turn, teachers of translation should highlight culture-based translations. In addition to that, Moroccan learners should be autonomous. In other words, they have to be active and responsible about what they learn. They should benefit from all means and ICT facilities they have nowadays so as to learn from authentic sources. In fact, the kinds of solutions suggested here require from every part to bear his or her responsibility if we really need to have a good language user and a good translator.

Conclusion

In this study an attempt has been made to investigate the translation errors that Moroccan learners make when they deal with tense and aspect. Some examples were provided to show the problem and our analyses have revealed several facts. Some explanations have been provided to help the reader has an idea about the sources of the problem and the approaches these learners adopt. The solutions suggested are not comprehensive but do state what we believe as highly essential and relevant to improving Moroccan learners' translations from English into Arabic.

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