

Contrastive Studies of Arabic and English: The Diglossic Parameter

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1. The Comparison of English with Arabic enjoys a long history and wide popularity in modern language research conducted by Arab or Arabist linguists. The earliest of such studies go back to the fifties, probably exhibiting the then new focus on language comparison with pedagogical objectives.¹ It is thus interesting to ponder on the various aspects of this line of research: its history, its relation to other lines of research, the issues it generates, its position within the research movement, its points of focus, the theoretical modifications it underwent, or changes in research attitudes towards it. In any survey of the state of the art, these and other questions will be pertinent. Unfortunately nothing much has been done in this respect. Therefore, these questions remain unanswered. The present paper concerns itself with one aspect of these studies. This is the noticeable alternation in the form of Arabic that researchers have chosen to compare with English in their studies.

Arabic is one of those languages that exhibit diglossia - a situation whereby two distinct forms of the language live side by side in the community. In all Arabic-speaking communities two distinct forms of Arabic - Standard Arabic (SA) and the regional spoken colloquial - co-exist. Both are eligible for comparison. Any researcher who sets out to compare English, or any language for that matter, with Arabic will face the question as to which of these forms he wants to choose for the comparison. All the studies that concern or involve a comparison of English with Arabic make this choice before getting involved in the actual task of description and comparison. I have not encountered a contrastive study of English and Arabic in which no decision is explicitly made as to which form of Arabic the comparison with English is going to be carried out.

The main question, however, is what reason or reasons determine the choice of either of these two forms. Why would a researcher choose to compare English with Standard Arabic sometimes, and with one of the spoken colloquials at others? Where should we look for these reasons or factors? It is to these questions that the present paper addresses itself.

2. Probably the history of language comparison - or later, contrastive analysis - will provide an answer. In the fifties, the status of language comparison was changed. It was given a new pedagogical purpose. It was felt to be essential in second language teaching, language learning and syllabus design. Instrumental in this was the role of Fries's and Lado's works. Before that, it was mainly limited to historical research in language genealogy - within what was conventionally called comparative-historical linguistics; but there were also to be found some synchronic comparisons between languages². This shift of emphasis generated thousands of studies of varying size and depth comparing different languages and using the results of these comparison for pedagogical ends.

In this new trend of comparison, the emphasis shifted to the differences after a long tradition of focusing on similarities between languages. It was even given a new name: contrastive analysis. Everyone looked at such points of differences to predict learning difficulty in L₂. L₁ interference - via transfer - was assumed to underlie all instances of difficulty in L₂ learning. Thus, a comparison of L₁ and L₂ will enable us to predict all the problematic areas, and hence, its crucial role in L₂ teaching. Even after it was established that this interference does not explain all difficulties in L₂ learning,³ interest in language contrast/comparison did not diminish. L₁ interference was found to be responsible for less than, or around, one third of the L₂ learners' errors, and this was in areas other than the sound system⁴. In this latter, L₁ interference is of a more substantial and decisive influence. Yes, language comparison could not predict all the errors, but it still could explain some.

And like all lines of linguistic research, language comparison found new directions, new focuses, new areas of research such as discoursal and supra-sentential structures, pragmatic functions, and new practical uses - such as translation studies.

Alongside this "applied" line, continued another line of contrastive/comparative studies which were not primarily concerned with the

applications - pedagogical or otherwise - of the contrast. These had pure linguistic interest in language typology, language universals, accumulation of evidence for a theoretical hypothesis, etc.⁵ In contrast to the “applied” comparisons, these so-called “theoretical contrastive studies” were mainly concerned with the similarities between languages or the limits of the differences between the linguistic systems.

3. Would this have any effect on the choice that our contrastivist researchers make as to what form of Arabic they want to compare English with ? It obviously should. For the theoretical contrastivist, the choice is determined by whether or not the form he chooses offers confirmation or, preferably, disconfirmation to an existing hypothesis; exhibits a new phenomenon; necessitates an auxiliary hypothesis; and the like. It also depends on how much access he has to the information about it; whether he can – with confidence - play the role of informant about it, including having a native intuition in it so as to be able to make judgments, and so on. Indeed, descriptive contrastive studies of Arabic and English constitute a good part of the inventory of Arabic-English contrastive studies, certainly in the late seventies and later. These are either concerned with similarities and differences between the two languages from a purely descriptive point of view or, in the wake of generative grammar with its universal principles, try to examine the validity of such constraints or hypotheses.⁶ One thing that becomes clear is that the overwhelming majority of these studies choose SA as the form of Arabic to be contrasted with English. The small sample of Arabic-English studies that has accumulated comprising more than a hundred of such studies, confirms this impression.

For the “applied” contrastivist, who is mainly concerned with the interference from L₁ or SL/ (Arabic) into L₂ or TL (English), the choice should be determined by other criteria, first among these is the question “Which of the two forms of Arabic does L₁ interference initiate from ?” The answer may be sought in the diglossic situation itself. Which one of the two linguistic forms at action is the native language ? If we go with Ferguson’s classical description of the situation, then the L form – the spoken colloquial in the case of Arabic - is going to be the native language. The High (H) form – SA - is not learned as a mother tongue at home. This would require the ‘applied’ contrastivist to conduct his comparison between English and one of the spoken colloquials since that is where the L₁ interference presumably originates.

On the other hand, we may agree with the view that the two linguistic forms in a diglossic situation divide the linguistic labour between them. There are linguistic functions that the H would perform - used in, and others that are performed by the Low (L) form. It follows that in the comparison of any point related to speech, for example, this or that particular colloquial should be chosen for the comparison with English since what used in such situations. Analogously, in the study of interference in translation or any other written activity or task, SA is to be chosen since it is the form used in such formal contexts. Translation from English into Arabic is predominantly written.

However, the above remarks need verification. The question of the source of interference is empirical. Does interference come from the spoken colloquial, or the Standard, or from both? The question has yet to be settled. I know only of a couple of studies that have dealt with this question⁷, and they suggest that interference comes from both forms of Arabic, though the spoken colloquials play a far greater role than the Standard. Of course, to determine the source of the interference is not operationally easy. We need a point which exhibits a three-way difference between English, SA, and the spoken colloquial in order to draw accurate conclusions about the source of the errors committed by Arabic-speaking learners of English. In the absence of such hard evidence, we are left with only the mainly impressionistic statement that interference comes from both.

This is the general understanding held by the practitioners in the field. In a paper tracing the errors of Jordanian learners of English made in the area of English verb tenses, Mukattash (1984), who bases his interpretation on a comparison of English with SA, offers the similarity that a certain tense form holds to its counterpart in the Jordanian spoken dialect as the reason for the low percentage of errors made in it.⁸ And in another comprehensive contrastive study of the verbs in English and Arabic, where the contrast is between English and SA, a number of the errors are interpreted as the result of possible negative transfer from colloquial Arabic.⁹

There is, however, one area where there seems to be no disagreement as to what the source of interference is. This is the sound system. The source is obviously this or that particular spoken colloquial. The errors that we commit in speaking English and our foreign accents reflect our Arabic

dialectal phonological features. We need not go further into this. Suffice it to say that it is because of this that such errors differ from one Arab learner of English to the other depending on his spoken colloquial. Similarly, the difficulties that face Arabic-speaking learners of English will differ since the sound systems of the spoken colloquials that these learners speak exhibit differences at various levels – pronunciation of individual sounds, syllable structure, stress placement, and intonation.

We may go further and claim that interference from the spoken colloquial does not stop here. It may extend to other levels of the linguistic system. Many of us, teachers of English, have experienced the situation where a grammatically erroneous sentence in an answer sheet turns out, by back translation into Arabic, to be quite well-formed in the spoken dialect of the student. We may also recall the frequent complaints made by Arab purists about colloquialisms creeping into modern Arabic diction, new or deviant constructions that pop out now and then, used in passages written in SA, nothing but instances of interference from the mother tongue into the Grand mother tongue.

4. With all this in mind, let us look at actual research conducted in the field of English and Arabic comparison. A brief survey that I made involving 53 theses, dissertations and books, and around 50 papers that deal with, or involve, a comparison of Arabic and English showed that the comparison is predominantly with SA. Out of the 53 theses, and dissertations, 46 compared or depended on a comparison of English with SA. Only seven compared English with one of the spoken dialects. Of the 50 papers, no less than 34 compared English to SA. This sample is admittedly not large, but it is representative of the research conducted in this field. The works included pure and pedagogically-oriented contrastive analyses of different points, including the sound system; error analysis; and translation studies; and discourse comparisons. Larger inventories of the literature in the field substantiate my impression.¹⁰

In our attempt to find an answer to this state of affairs we need first to consider the question of the comparison objectives. Our sample includes studies of different orientations. Though the majority are mainly concerned with pedagogical problems - i.e. interference for L₁ and how to overcome it- there is a good number of translation-oriented studies. These deal with language comparison as a way of explaining the problems faced, or are likely to be faced, by translators from English into Arabic

and vice-versa. The sample also includes a few studies of purely descriptive/theoretical nature with no claim of any applied consequence. This combination may partly explain the predominance of comparison with SA. All those studies which concern translation issues make the comparison with SA. This is not difficult to explain when we realize that translation from English is nearly always into SA. The volume of English texts translated into any one of the spoken colloquials is negligible. The reason, of course, is that most translated texts are written and the form of Arabic used in writing is SA. Moreover, all the descriptive contrastive studies in the sample involved comparisons of English with SA. These researchers have exercised their right to select the form of Arabic of their choice to compare with English.

What about the pedagogically-oriented contrastive studies in the sample? One would think that the choice of the form of Arabic in such studies will be governed, as was discussed above, by internal assumptions about the nature and source of interference. The survey shows that a good number of these have chosen to conduct the comparison with SA and not with one of the colloquials. In those that dealt with syntactic points, the comparison was almost exclusively between English and the Standard.¹¹ Does this reflect the belief that in this area of the linguistic structure the interference initiates for SA and not the spoken colloquial of the learner? None of the studies surveyed state this as the basis for their choice of the former as the form to compare with English. In so doing, they are either implying that the transfer of the Arabic-speaking learners of English comes from SA structures, or that there is no difference between the two forms of Arabic in those areas. As for the first implication, this is an empirical question to be settled by experiment. The falsity of the other suggestion becomes obvious when one begins to compare the first sentence said in any of the spoken colloquials with its equivalent in SA.

In the various areas of the sound system, one would expect the comparison to be between English and one of the spoken colloquials. It seems to be the logical thing to do here since SA is not normally used in speech. People may write in SA, but they speak in their colloquials which constitute their mother tongues. In those formal situation where SA is used in speech, the speakers transfer dialectal sound features into the Standard. This is why SA is spoken with different regional accents. The difference is reflected in variation in individual sounds (consonants and vowels), stress placement, intonation, etc. It is general practice among

Arabs to detect the regional affiliation of speakers of SA by using cues representing dialectal features of their sound system.

In this light it is rather unusual to find some studies in our small sample which compare aspects of the sound system of English with those of SA. Two of these contrast the intonational patterns of English with those of SA.¹² A third, example is a textbook in contrastive grammar, which deals with all the important aspects of sound system.¹³

Of course, such comparisons will inevitably lead to wrong conclusions about the difficulties that Arabic-speaking learners are going to encounter in learning English, in all those instances where the sound system of SA and that of the spoken dialect differ. A classical example of this is the /p/ which, though not a separate phoneme in SA, does not constitute any problem to Iraqi learners of English since it occurs as such in their spoken dialect; or the distribution of the dark and clear /l/ in English, which is said to cause problems for Arabic-speakers. Well, it does, but only for some and not others. The absence of initial consonant clusters in SA and the difficulty they cause for Arabic-speaking learners of English is yet another example of such statements, which proves to be false in the case of Arabic-speaking learners of English from the Gulf, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq; the spoken colloquials in these regions allow two-consonant initial clusters and they still surprise the researchers when they come up with the unexpected /kinton/ instead of the predicted /kilinton/. Such studies seem to disregard all the above stated facts about Arabic when they choose to compare English with a non-existent system, or a system from which interference does not initiate.

5. If freedom of choice and theoretical assumptions do not provide a satisfactory explanation to the prevalence in the use of SA in the comparisons with English, then we must look for an explanation elsewhere.

I would like to suggest that this "state of affairs" is the result of some indirect – even subliminal reasons. These may not stem from such direct association between linguistic form or variety and source of interference. More likely, it is the function of external research factors, or even socio-political factors.

General and popular views about the Arabic diglossic situation should not be overlooked. How people look at the status of Arabic in the Arab world, its centrality to Arab unity, or unifying forces, its place in Arab culture, its religious connotations, its association with past heritage would create definite attitudes towards linguistic issues involving Arabic, including standards of correctness, methods of study, acceptability of variants, and tolerance of variation. Language policies are drawn on bases not very far from such views and attitudes. Given the prestigious position that SA enjoys in the Arab World and the above mentioned attributes conferred on it, there is little wonder that we see regulations and laws issued in more than one Arab country to protect this form of Arabic. Some are straightforward in banning studies - or activities - involving the spoken regional dialects. With such laws, there is no place for contrastive work comparing English with the spoken dialects. In more than one place people who intended to conduct such studies were discreetly discouraged sometimes; at others, they were not so discreetly dissuaded.

But what about the views and attitudes of the researchers themselves, all well-versed in the basic tenets of modern linguistics, like language or dialect egalitarianism and scientific objectivity? Here too, we cannot exclude such external ideological views or leanings held by the linguists, exercising their subtle subliminal impact - if not determining research choices. I am afraid that some, many, of us, language students, hold, albeit unconsciously, such popular views as, for example, the supremacy of SA or the squishiness of the spoken dialects. Our jokes still revolve round these dialects: dialect peculiarities are all objects of wonder and endearment, or disdain, both implying a not so serious attitude. The serious, hard-core research is reserved for SA.

We may note here that the huge linguistic heritage of Arabic and modern research by traditionalist Arab grammarians is exclusively on SA. The spoken dialects are excluded on grounds of their being corrupt or deviant forms of the Standard. The spoken dialects are to some of us still part of the folklore and thus have a folkloric interest and significance. Articles that investigate aspects of the spoken dialects appear only in folklore magazines and journals. In titles of studies concerning Arabic, if the word Arabic occurs unmodified, then the reference is usually to SA. Otherwise the word Arabic is modified so as to show its regional affiliation and to indicate its limitations - i.e. spoken.

And we are protective about standard Arabic, if not for anything, then because of what we conceive as a threat to its survival by views that were, or are, commonly held in some linguistic circles in the West. Some of us will remember instances when Arab M.A. and Ph.D. students of linguistics were discouraged from doing research that involved SA. Instead, they were asked why they would not deal with the "living language of Egypt, or the living language of Morocco, or Iraq?" I am certain the inference to the mortality of SA is not lost here. I know of one colleague who, after writing his dissertation on some area of the sound system of Iraqi Arabic, encouraged all M.A. students under his supervision to write about the sound system of SA, or compare English with SA and not Iraqi Arabic whenever he could.

But does our choice of SA have to stem from such external socio-political or ideological considerations? Not necessarily. One good reason for this choice is what I want to call the "research security" that the contrastivist feels when he deals with a linguistic form that is clearly defined, highly codified (to borrow Ferguson's description), and which has a rich descriptive and analytical literature. A look at the available linguistic literature on any of the spoken dialects will reveal its poverty when compared to the voluminous accumulation of linguistic descriptions and analyses of SA.

The literature on any of these dialects is limited to a handful elementary descriptions, some of which were even written by nonspecialists, and another handful of unpublished dissertations, usually inaccessible. Thus, in working on noun modifiers in one of the colloquials, for example, the researcher has to determine for himself how he wants to define the set of modifiers, the categorial and functional status of these modifiers, their types, distribution, etc .. since he is probably not going to find any previous accounts of these; a problem he is not going to face if he were to choose SA for his comparison with English. In other words he will have to do the description first, before getting into the task of comparing these modifiers with their English counterparts. This alone will drive him away from the choice of the spoken colloquial. When this is combined with other factors like the ones just mentioned, the answer to the question of the motivations behind such choices is not difficult to see.

Notes

1. e.g. A. Malike, "A Comparative Study of American English and Iraqi Arabic Consonant Clusters," *Language Learning*, VIII 3&4, (1956-7) pp. 65-87; and R. Nasr, "The Phonological Problems Involved in the Teaching of American English to Native Speakers of Lebanese Arabic," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, (1955).
2. J. Fisiak, "Some Introductory Notes Concerning Contrastive Linguistics," in J. Fisiak (ed.) *Contrastive Linguistics and the Language Teacher*, (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981), p.1.
3. Cf. A Alatis (ed.), *Monograph Series on Language and Linguistics*, No. 21, (Washington DC: Georgetown Univ. Press, 1968).
4. L. Mukattash, "The Problem with Difficulty in Foreign Language," in Dahiyat and Ibrahim (ed.), *Papers From the First Conference on the Problem of Teaching English Language and Literature at Arab Universities*, (Amman, 1983) p.149.
5. F. Aarts and H Wekker, "Contrastive Grammar: Theory and Practice," in J. Fisiak (ed.) *Further Insights into Contrastive Analysis*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990) p.166.
6. For example M. Yassin, "Contrastive Analysis of Genitival Complex Structures in English and Arabic," *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts-, Riyadh University* Vol: 5 (1977); A.M. Hussein, "Realization of Request in English and Arabic". M.A. thesis, University of Basrah (1984); M. Bakir, "Notes on Subjacency as a Syntactic Constraint in Arabic and English," *PSiCL* 21 (1986), Mitleb, "Vowel Length Contrast in Arabic and English: A Spectrographic Test," *Journal of Phonetics*, Vol: 12.
7. These are: M.H. Ibrahim, "Diglossia and Foreign language Teaching", *IRAL*, XV, no 2, (1977), pp. 158-163; and M. Sieny, "Diglossia and Foreign language Teaching", *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts-, Riyadh University*, 3, (1974), pp. 66-83.
8. L. Mukattash, "CA, Error Analysis and Learning Difficulty," in J. Fisiak (ed) *Contrastive Linguistics, Prospects and Problems*, (Berlin: Mouton, 1984), p.347.
9. N. Kharma, *A Contrastive Analysis of the Use of Verb Forms in English and Arabic*, (Heidelberg: Julius Groos Verlag, 1983).
10. Lewis Mukattash, personal communication.
11. Three articles written by the same author stand as the exception to this. These are:

- A. Meziani, "The Past in English and Moroccan Arabic," *IRAL*, 12, 1980, pp. 248-252.
- A. Meziani, "English must and Moroccan Arabic," *ELT Journal*, XXXV (3), 1981, pp. 267-270
- A. Meziani, "Modality in English and Moroccan Arabic," *IRAL*, 21, 1983, pp. 267-282.
12. B. Gatta', "A Contrastive Study of the Intonational Patterns of Questions in Standard English and Modern Standard Arabic," M.A. thesis, Basrah University. 1988; and G. Mohammed and B. Gatta', "The Tonal Features and the Attitudinal Implications of the Echoing Nuclear Tones in Arabic and English Wh-Questions; A Contrastive Study," *Abhaath al-Yarmouk*, Vol: 11 (2), 1993, pp. 57-78.
13. Cf. A. Khalil, *A Contrastive Grammar of English and Arabic*, Jerusalem 1996.

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