Arabic Collocations: The Need for an Arabic Combinatory Dictionary

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The provision of collocations in a reference form is becoming increasingly important for foreign language learners and users as well as for translators. It is also important, however, to understand the nature of lexical collocability so as to be able to determine which lexical combination should be entered in the reference work and which are not needed there. The Arabic language is rich in many forms of collocation, and even native speakers of Arabic today seem to need a reference for the various combinations of lexical items that affect their language production with relation to usage and grammar.

This paper aims to explain the semantic nature of lexical collocations, at least in the Arabic language. The paper also proposes a methodology for the entry of Arabic collocations in a special dictionary, which I have adopted in the dictionary I have already compiled, which is awaiting publication (cf. Hafiz, forthcoming).

It has now become clear that a combinatory dictionary of Arabic is not only important for Arabists and orientalists, but also for translators, foreign writers in Arabic and foreign learners of Arabic. Their need for such a reference work seems to be evident as can be seen from the difficulties they often encounter and the errors they often make while speaking/writing and translating.

1. Collocations: A Problematic Area

Foreign learners of Arabic, in particular, find collocations in the language

a specifically problematic area, even when they are at an advanced level of language learning. Real life examples of this phenomenon can be easily spotted in any language production (whether written or spoken) of a foreign speaker of Arabic. Even authorities like J. Dickins and J.C.E. Watson, in their book *Standard Arabic: An Advanced Course* (1998), fall into the trap of wrong collocations making errors like:

(*) ؟...إلى حدث الذي ما   instead of : ؟...اـ حدث .

Observations like the above and other similar ones prompted the writer of this paper to venture into compiling an Arabic collocations dictionary, which is believed to be the first of its kind in Arabic (cf. Hafiz, forthcoming) . I was even more surprised when, in a survey conducted in Saudi Arabia (2000), I found that even educated native speakers of Arabic produced different types of collocational errors.

2. Is Collocation a Semantic Relation?

Collocation is considered by some linguists as a ' problem' (Ivir 1988), by others as a 'phenomenon' (Hoogland 1993) and yet by others as a 'lexical relation' (Emery 1991). Firth (1968) expects mutual expectancy between collocated words, but do we really know the rule or the nature of such expectancy? If the rule is not contextual or grammatical, could it be semantic? (see also Allerton 1984).

Careful analysis of Arabic collocations may add more weight to the assumption that collocation is more of a semantic relation than anything else. Whether or not this can be generalised to other languages is not the issue here, and if it can't make such a generalization with a reasonable degree of confidence, we may have a reason to believe that collocation may be motivated differently in different languages.

Let us look at this case where the verb ضرب collocates with different nouns, giving rise to different meanings of the verb, such as :

- **heart**   قلب

- **coin**   عملة

- **tent**   خيمة

- **example** مثل

مثل-   **example**

The verb also collocates with the following prepositional phrases (with literal translations) as in the following :

في الأرض   **in the land'**

في الماء   **in the water'**

على يد   **on the hand of'**

If we leave aside the bilingual perception of these meanings of ضرب and instead look at them from within the source language itself (i.e. Arabic), we will be able to establish a clear semantic motivation between ضــرب and its collocated lexical items. The lexical (non-contextual) meaning of ضــرب has to do with movement, i.e. changing the situation of something from being static to active. This meaning explains the semantic relation between ضــرب and the above collocated lexical items. It further explains phrases and constructions such as *'beating of the heart'*, *'rupturing of a vein'*, *'coining of money'*, *'setting up a tent'* and *'giving an example'*. The same observation applies to the above phrasal collocates, which refer, consecutively, to 'commencement of a journey', 'going swimming' and 'preventing someone from doing something'.

Let us look at another example of Arabic collocations but this time between collocations of nouns and adjectives. It can be claimed that the noun جريمة (= crime) collocates with the adjective نكــراء (= detestable, outrageous) because of the semantic relationship between the meanings that the two words designate. As is known in Arabic, the word نكراء is used when you want to express a sense of strong detest to something, and thus it seems natural to describe ' جريمة crime' as 'detestable' نكراء due to its horrific nature (as perceived in the mind of the native speaker). Also, as a crime usually affects a community rather than just an individual, using the sense of ' detest' by the people seems to be more collocationally appropriate than using other senses expressed by other adjectives of negative sense. In the same way one can justify the

collocation of **'throw'** with **'party'**. Holding a party, at least in the English-speaking world, is associated with a highly active event leaving an effect on the community of the invited people that is similar to the effect caused by an object when thrown, for instance, at a static crowd.

However, it is not always easy to understand the semantic relationship holding between collocates in general in different languages. It may be comparatively easier to do so with Arabic collocates as the semantic origins (classical etymology of root-forms) of most Arabic words have been recorded by early Arab linguists, which can facilitate the process of understanding/rationalizing the semantic behaviour of words in a given collocation. In English, on the other hand, it may be very difficult to identify a semantic relationship that explains the collocability of words like **'entertain + doubts/proposals'** or **'explode + a myth/an idea'**. In other words, what is it in the meaning of the word 'entertain' that allows it to combine with words like **'doubts'** and **'proposals'** and what is it in the meaning of the word **'explode'** that allows it to combine with the nouns **'myth'** and **'idea'**? If we had sufficient knowledge of the root meanings of all of these words, we could have probably been more capable of explaining their mutual expectancies, and thus be able to determine whether they are semantic or not.

3. Collocations in the Dictionary

As far as Arabic is concerned, the foreign learner/user of the language may find it greatly beneficial to learn the root-forms meanings (classical etymology) of Arabic words as this may help him/her make more correct choices of Arabic collocations of which they have had no previous knowledge. However, due to the vastness of Arabic lexical and derivational resources (giving more collocational occurrences) and to the limitations of time and learning opportunities, the foreign learner/user will greatly appreciate an accessible work of reference that contains as many Arabic common collocations as they would need in their communication.

With essential differences in their layouts, the *Combinatory Dictionary of English* (Benson , Benson and Ilson (*BBI*), 1996) and the *Arabic Collocations Dictionary* (Hafiz, forthcoming) agree in their purposes as set out in the *BBI* Preface:

> This material is of vital importance to those learners of English who

are native speakers of other languages. Heretofore, they have had no source that would consistently indicate, for example, which verbs are used with which nouns; they could not find in any existing dictionary such collocations as call an alert, lay down a barrage, hatch a conspiracy. [...]

Having a combinatory dictionary such as the *BBI* at their disposal foreign language learners of English will most likely avoid such typical errors as : *they mentioned him the book, *a stranger was lurking, *we are very fond,* etc. (*BBI*:vii). Similarly, an Arabic dictionary of collocations would help learners and users of Arabic as a foreign/second avoid such errors as: موقف شديد* and (حدد موقفا , instead of عمل موقفا*)

etc . موقف حازم , (instead of)

Indeed, what seems to be required is a dictionary of Arabic collocations that will help the advanced learner of the language (often diplomats, journalists, professionals and businessmen) avoid embarrassing mistakes like:

- صنعت موعداً (*) instead of أخذت موعداً

- سعادة الوزير (*) instead of معالي الوزير

- نسخ الكتاب (*) instead of طبع الكتاب

The benefits of an such a dictionary will in fact go beyond the foreign learner/user to the native speaker of Arabic, who often confuses between different prepositions when combined with certain verbs, e.g., كتــب ل in stead of كتب إلى and أخذ من in place of. أخذ عن .

Obviously, a dictionary of Arabic collocations would not include open collocations (such as أكل+طعام ، بيت+جمــيـل etc.) as they are freely used and can be combined without specific knowledge needed by the user. A collocation dictionary intended for learning purposes may only include restricted collocations (e.g نشـــب+قتـــال) ,.and bound collocations (e.g ,. الحرب الباردة) ., as well as short idioms (e.g حرب+ضروس) ,

Clearly, not all collocations are lexical. Grammatical collocations are equally important, as structural combinability is even more

unpredictable, sometimes even for the native speaker. A satisfactory definition of a grammatical collocation is that it is "a phrase consisting of a dominant word (noun adjective, verb) and a preposition or grammatical structure such as an infinitive or a clause" (*BBI*, op.cit.). Arabic examples of this type of collocation are numerous. Consider, for instance, the grammatical collocates with the verb [رب] below:

participated with, contribute ‘   في ي الأمر بـ — سهم ، نصيب ، حظ -

stopped, stepped back‘   عن الأمر -

pointed towards   إلى ... -

The question that remains to be looked into in this connection is related to the treatment of Arabic collocations in a dictionary in a way that the potential users can access information easily and efficiently.

Collocations present the lexicographer with the problem of how many and which collocations must be included in the dictionary, and how and where to enter them. The lexicographer's task within this context is purely descriptive. He would need to find out which particular co-occurrences in Arabic whose English equivalents are not exactly the same as in English (e.g. in terms of lexical constituency). For example, the cooccurrence of the two words تناول and الطعام may be literally translated into English as ‘ ate the food’. However, while the meaning of the verb تناول has something to do with ‘ taking’, it has nothing to do with the act of ‘eating’.

The approach of Ivir (1988:43-49) based on "the notion of the prototype of core meaning and semantic actualisation or focusing to explain meaning by collocation" is probably most accommodating for the lexicographer in this endeavour. According to this approach, words are thought to be responsible for introducing into the collocation which they formulate their own ‘core meanings’ or " non-specific semantic potential, which is then made specific in particular ways favoured or allowed by particular collocates" (ibid:45).

As pointed out above, a dictionary of Arabic collocations will include only three types of collocations: (i) restricted collocations, (ii) bound collocations , and (iii) idioms. Such collocations should be entered

according to the first letter of the first word in the combination. For example, يــــت القصـــيد will be entered under the letter-section of ب in alphabetical order with the other items regardless of whether the first word is the collocator or the core word. Emery (op. cit.) , Benson (1986) and Hoogland (op. cit) argue that a collocation should be entered under the core word in the active Arabic-English dictionary. However, for a speedy and time-economical reference process, the entered collocation should be included both under the core word alphabetically in one entry and under its other collocate(s) in a separate entry. For example, the (verb-noun) collocation اشتدت الحرب can be found in the entry of the verb

اشـــتد as well as in the entry of حـــرب . Phrasal structures in grammatical collocations, on the other hand, may be entered only under the core word, as the user will not usually look independently for usage of prepositions and articles.

The entered collocations will include the various combinations of parts of speech as follows:

1.   Verb + noun, where the noun can be the subject: هدأ الموج, , the

object ضرب الخيمة, :or (حال) a state . استشاط غضبا : This combination composes a large section of Arabic collocations as almost every single verb in the language has its own numerous noun collocates.

2.   Verb + prepositional noun phrase, where the noun is the indirect object   استقال من العمـــل   (بيت له أمرا) -

3.   Verb + prepositional noun phrase, where the phrase acts as adverb (نفذ بدقة ، ضرب بشدة. .e.g)

4.   Verb + noun phrase, where the noun is in the form of adverbial condition (e.g. . اتصل هاتفيا / برقيا ، خاطب كتابيـــا)

5.   Verb + conjunction + verb, usually synonymous (طار وحلق ، هاج وماج. .e.g)

6.   Noun + noun, in a construct condition إضافة e.g مسرح الأحداث .

7.   Noun + conjunction + noun (e.g. .(تنظيف وترتيب ، عزم وإصرار)

8.   Noun + adjective (e.g. .(جمال أخاذ ، قوة عظمى)

9.   Noun + prepositional noun phrase (e.g. .(حفنة من المال ، غاية في الأدب)

10.   Noun + preposition (e.g. ‏(ــ لا‌استكما ، ــ قياسا ، ــ مقارنة)‏

11.   Adjective + noun (e.g. ‏(القلب كبير ، الأخلاق حسن ، المحيا جميل)‏

12.   Adjective + adverbial phrase, where the adverbial phrase consists of prep + noun (e.g. ‏(بشدة مستنكر ، الأمر في العجيب)‏

Such a wide variety in Arabic collocational combinations may at first confuse the lexicographer as to their order of entry in the dictionary. Amongst the important question which the compiler has to settle are the following:
1. Should the combination be entered under the first constituent?
2. What if the first constituent is a preposition?
3. If the combination is made up of a verb and a noun, should it be entered under the verb or under the noun?
4. What about combinations of nouns and adjectives, and combinations of multiple constituents?

The following approach was utilized in compiling the *Arabic Collocations Dictionary* (Hafiz, forthcoming). Briefly, this approach enters collocations alphabetically and in the following order:

- Verb + noun/prepositional noun phrase combinations: entered both under the verb and the noun
- Verb + verb combinations: entered under the first item
- Noun + noun/prepositional noun phrase combinations: entered under both nouns
- Noun + adjective: entered under both the noun and the adjective
- Preposition/other word combinations: entered under the preposition
- Adjective + noun combinations: entered under the adjective

With this method of entry, the users will always be able to look for the combinations they need

Note

* One of my Arab colleagues wanted to invite me along with other friends to a party. He initially announced the invitation in Arabic, but there being some

colleagues who did not understand Arabic, he repeated the invitation in English: *"I'm er... er..."*, and for a moment he paused to think of the right verb to use with *'party'*! Realising what he wanted to say, I spontaneously shouted: *"you are throwing a party"?* He gave me a confused smile but continued: *"Yes, I'm throwing a party and all of you are invited"*.

Pondering on this incident at a later time I remembered an earlier discussion with Jan Hoogland during the 1994 EURALEX Conference in Amsterdam about the need of Arabists and orientalists for a comprehensive reference work on Arabic collocations. With more research into the question, It has become clear to me that a combinatory dictionary of Arabic is not only essential for Arabists and orientalists, but also for foreign learners Arabic as well for learners/users of Arabic as a native language.

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