



PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATING PREPOSITIONS

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Abstract

This paper handles an intriguing topic that pertains to the problems of translating prepositions from English into Arabic and vice versa. The problem is noticeable in various arenas of speaking, writing and translation. There is an imperious need to limit and identify the problem and pinpoint the veritable causes that superinduce serious problems to the translator of both Arabic and English. The crux of the problem lies in being insistent. It is indeed surprising that little search has been undertaken so far to discuss the problem and solve it. The present work, thus, vehemently ventilates the problem and offers, hopefully, reasonable solutions to it. The paper will be varnished with authentic examples mainly taken from students' performance in translation.

The thresh of the paper will follow these lines: the number and classes of prepositions, the location of prepositions, prepositional collocation, the causes of translating prepositions and the proposed solutions to the problem.

I. Introduction

A preposition is a word that expresses a relation between two entities, one being that represented by the prepositional complement, the other by another part of the sentence.¹ Prepositions are significant for typological comparison and because they pertain to uses of promotion and demotion (active and passive).² They also mark various functions; a number of languages that have no case system (as English and French) usually employ prepositions to mark beneficiaries and similar roles as in the following examples:

- (1) John gave the book to Mary.
- (2) Jean a donné le livre à Marie.

Due to all of the above facts prepositions cannot be ignored in the research on natural languages. This also underscores indirectly the importance of this paper in handling a topic that pertains to translating prepositions, an issue that has almost

¹.See Quirk, 1985:657

².See Palmer, 1994:8

been ignored in Arabic linguistics.³ The preponderance of studies relating to English prepositions is an indirect reflection of the sparsity of material published on Arabic regarding this issue.

Translators and students of English have equally recognised that prepositions pose pedagogical problems. They collocate with nouns, verbs, adjectives and past participles without a logical rule. They are keen to understand what these collocations mean; though they usually avoid using them.

II. Classes of Prepositions

It is indeed cumbersome to classify prepositions according to form since this method forces one to handle prepositions individually, rather than as classes. The most optimal way to handle prepositions is to classify them according to their meanings. Lindstromberg summarised three approaches to word meaning, including prepositions' meaning. One approach to word meaning advocated by Ruhl says that while words seem to have different meanings in different contexts, all types of polysemy are virtually an illusion. He believes that words have a strong tendency to have a single general meaning. To substantiate this point, he closely examined

³. See also Mouakket, A 1986:1

the verb *hit* in various contexts and showed that there is a quite abstract and inexpressible meaning which appears in all contexts where *hit* occurs. According to Lindstronberg a teacher might find this abstract meaning hard to explain to his students.

Another approach to word meaning says that a lot of high frequently used words are thoroughly delexicalized, i.e. they do not have a meaning that is common to all or most contexts in which they occur. A good example is the preposition *of*. This approach is very well-known among applied linguists, such as Sinclair (1987) and Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992).

A third approach to word meaning is held by both Bragman (1981) and Lakoff (1987). This approach maintains that single words have limited shades of meaning which combine with the meanings of other words in a modular fashion to create overall meanings.

It seems to me that the this approach is more logical and convincing. Words have indeed finite shades of meaning; otherwise, it would be cumbersome for language learner to learn them and later on put them into use. Words meaning share or cooperate to give the general meaning of the whole sentence. Furthermore, this approach has pedagogical implications that if used properly could yield productive

results.⁴ This approach has been used in this paper and thus prepositions and their translation will be handled within a framework of a semantically based theory.⁵

III. Arabic Prepositions

Arabic includes a wealth of fixed prepositions and particles that combine with both verbs and adjectives. However, there seems to be no consensus among Arab linguists as to the exact number of prepositions in Arabic. Ibn Malik believes that Arabic includes twenty prepositions which comprise min, ila, hatha hal, hashu, Cade, fii, Can, Cala, muth, munthu, rubba, lam, kay, waw, taa', kaaf, baa, laCalla and mata.⁶ Sibawayh adds to this list lawla, when it is attached to pronouns. For instance, lawlaa-ka 'if it not you'. Al-jurjani believes that there are merely seventeen Arabic prepositions. In other words, he excludes mata, laCalla and kai from Ibn Malik's list. Ibn Hisham Al-ansari sees that Arabic includes eighteen prepositions (mata and laCalla are not included). Al-ashmouni believes that Arabic includes twenty-three prepositions; the new three are balah, lat and haa.⁷ The last

⁴ See Lindstromberg, (1996) to be familiar with the uses of this approach in teaching prepositions.

⁵ For a sketch on different approaches to handle prepositions, see Cienki, 1988.

⁶ Alfiyat Ibn Malik. Ibn Malik. See also Sharh Ibn Caqil Cala Alfiyat Ibn Malik vol. 2, p.3.

⁷ Mughni Al-labiib Can kitab al-aCaariib, vol. 2, p.274.

linguist to add another preposition to Ibn Malik's list is Al-harawi who added maC. He is the only Arab linguist in this regard.

Despite this discrepancy among Arab linguists in the number of prepositions, most contemporary Arab linguists follow Ibn Malik's classification.

IV. THE MEANING OF PREPOSITIONS

Arabic prepositions carry various meanings to the extent that it is so hard to pinpoint their meanings apart from the phrase or construction in which they occur. This aspect of prepositions poses many problems to translators and learners of Arabic. Since the purpose of this paper is to handle the problems in translating prepositions, we will be satisfied with providing two tables that summarise all the meanings of the various prepositions. (See Appendixes I and II).

V. ENGLISH PREPOSITIONS

There are numerous prepositions in English. They range between fifty and sixty prepositions. Grammar books usually divide prepositions into central and complex prepositions. Central prepositions include at, but, by, down, for, from, in, like, near, of, off, on, out, past, per, pro, qua, re, round, sans, since, than, through, till, to, up, via, with, abut, above, across, after, against, along, amid, among, anti, around, atop, before, behind, below, beneath, beside, besides, between, beyond,

circa, despite, during, except, inside, into, notwithstanding, onto, opposite, outside, over, pace, pending, throughout, towards, under, underneath, unlike, until, upon, versus, vis-a-vis, within, without.

Other prepositions are complex or marginal. These include bar, barring, excepting, excluding, save, concerning, considering, regarding, respecting, touching, failing, wanting, following, pending, given, granted, including, less, minus, plus times.

Prepositions also occur in prepositional phrases such as according to, in compliance with, in lieu of.⁸

English prepositions express the following relations and meanings:

- a) spatial relations such as at, on, in, near, between, round, up, over, from.
- b) Time such as at, on, in, by, before, after, till, for, during, through.
- c) The cause/purpose meaning such as because, of, on account of, for, from, to, at.
- d) The means/agentive meaning is expressed by: in....manner, like, with, by, without, at.
- e) various relations indicated by of
- f) possession: of, with, by.

⁸. For a long list of this type of prepositions, see Wren and Martin, 1995:110

- g) concession: in spite of, despite, for all, with all.
- h) Respect expressed by with reference to, with regard to, as for, except, but, save.
- i) Exception and Addition expressed by except for, apart from, aside from.
- j) Negation condition expressed by but for.

Moreover, prepositions have the following syntactic functions:⁹

- 1) As a postmodifier in a noun phrase:

e.g. the man in the black hat was reading a magazine.

- 2) As adverbial:

e.g. the students were running in the field. (adjunct)

From my point of view, I find computers so useful
(subjunctive).

In all fairness, she did try to call the police (disjunct)

On the other hand, he made no attempt to help her
(conjunct)

- c) As complementation

e.g. She was picking on his simple writings (verb complement)

He is excited at the news of his promotion. (adjective compl.)

VIA. CAUSES AND EXPLANATIONS OF ERRORS IN TRANSLATING PREPOSITIONS

As stated before, prepositions pose severe problems and difficulties to translators and language learners of English. There are several reasons for these

⁹. See Quirk et al., 1985:657.

problems and difficulties. These reasons should be taken in their totality, rather than individually.

1. Many propositions, probably most to them, are utilised in numerous ways that render their senses bizarre, especially when they are taken apart from the context in which they occur. For instance, Wood (1967) recognises twenty-one senses for the preposition *to*. Lindkvist (1950) recognises eight purely spatial senses of the same preposition. The preposition *on* can be used to mean 'in contact with the surface of as in: on a chair, on a table. *On* also shows another meaning which is totally independent of the above one, as these examples show: on duty, on hire, on pension.

. In a comparative study of both Arabic and English prepositions Khayru-d-din (1979) provides this table of comparison:

<u>Arabic Prep</u>		<u>English Prep</u>	
?ila	5	at	6
min	8	by	3
fii	5	for	10
Cala	7	from	6
bi	8	in	9
li	2	of	11
Cann	6	on	6
		to	10
		with	5

Khayru-l-din points out that the above meanings are subject to change. Learners are required to know these meanings, the part of speech that is subcategorised for a specific preposition and studying the underlying structure of these prepositions.

Kharyru-l-din gives *on* as an example. In both Arabic and English we say:

1. She arrived on Friday. تصل يوم الجمعة
2. She arrived at the 10 of May. تصل في العاشر من أيار
3. He lectured on pollution. يتأخر حول التلوث
4. The farm is on sale. المرمعة للبيع

The sentences above show that Arabic either deletes the preposition or uses a different one (*O* in 1, *in* in 2, *about* in 3, and *for* in 4). This clearly shows that there are a number of sentences that include a preposition while in Arabic that preposition is not required. For instance, student (12) translated this English sentence 'he was awarded the Noble Prize in 1964' as: حصل على جائزة نوبل للسلام عام ١٩٦٤ thus deleting the English preposition *in*.

2. Prepositional idioms are not always logical. For instance, in the case of the word *circumstance* one can say *in the circumstances* or *under the circumstances*. Another example involves the verb *averse*, which means 'turn away from'. In a sentence like:

He averted *to* help me.

We use the preposition *to*. If we talk about a logical choice of a preposition, then *from* would be an excellent choice, but it is not acceptable in English:

* He averted *from* helping me.

3. The diglossic situation in Arabic.¹⁰ Some of the students' translations reveal that the existence of the diverse varieties of Arabic is indeed a dilatory in translating texts into or from Arabic. For instance, student (10) translated:

'...became an early example of King's philosophy of non-violent protest' as:
وأصبحت هذه الطريقة مثال كبير على فلسفة كنفغ بطريقة الاحتجاج
This student used ب instead of في . This is a common use in Jordanian Arabic where

[fii] is usually substituted by [bi], Cf.

A. Where is your father? (أ) وين أبوك ؟

B. at home. (ب) بالدار .

4. To express various shades of meaning prepositions vary according to the preceding or following part of speech. Apparently for pedagogical purposes, Azar (1981, Appendix 2) provides a long list of phrasal verbs. For instance, the verb 'check' occurs in different structures with different meanings, Cf.

¹⁰. The present writer believes that Arabic involves more than two forms (H and L). There are indeed five varieties of Arabic. For a detailed explanation of this point, see Kanakri, 1988.

check in (into)	'register at a hotel'
check into	'investigate'
check out	(1)'take a book from the library. (2)'investigate'
check out (of)	'leave a hotel or apartment'

Arabic presents a similar difficulty, Cf.

تعلّمت من صادقاً	'I learned from Sadiq'
تعلّمت في المدرسة	'I learned at school'
تعلّمت على يدٍ محترفٍ	'I learned from an expert'

Changing a preposition yields a change in the meaning of the whole phrase. There is a severe collocational restriction on the use of a specific preposition to express a certain meaning.¹¹ Both Arabic and English hold the same situation.

This is a bona fide situation that learners encounter. It is indeed hard to overcome. Based on personal experience of such situations students usually substitute one preposition for another. Thus student (9) replace [Cala] 'on' by [fi] 'in', Cf.

'Both his parents encouraged him to attend college'
وشجّواه والديه في دخول الكلية (بدلاً من: على دخول الكلية)

Also student (12) translated the same sentence as:

شجّواه والديه لاجتماعه بالكلية.

5. Both Arabic and English prepositions carry a number of meanings that are not always alike. For instance, *in* in English is realised to have nine meanings

recipient	?
purpose	We work in order to live.
duration	He will come in five minutes.
condition	The thief is in trouble.
manner	He came in a hurry.
place	He lives in New York.
position	The box is in the wardrobe.
accompaniment	It is considered a crime in itself.
instrument	?

While the same Arabic preposition carries five senses:

place	رأيت الرجل في الشارع
time	كان المزارع صريراً في حياته
duration	كان يرتفع في المحاضرة
accompaniment	نحن هنا في صحبة الصبر
attachment	صل لك في أن تحدثنا عن الباحرة؟

¹¹. See Qudah and Kanakri, (1996).

Smith (1987) provides a number of phrasal verbs in which Arabic preposition do not coincide with their direct English translation. Some of these examples appear below. (Note that the correct answer is provided in parenthesis)

- * to arrive to (for at)
- * to be short to (for of)
- * responsible from (for of)
- * afraid from (for of)
- * to look to (for at)
- * This book is to me (for me)
- * with me my camera (I have my camera with me)
- * I went home for get my book (I went home to get my book)

Due to this state of fact translation from Arabic into English and vice versa poses a number of problems based on the degree of similarities or differences. For

instance, student No. 6 translated : 'By the time he was nineteen' as '

مع مرور الوقت أصبح ذا تسعة عشر عاماً.

' The preposition *by* is the cause of this erroneous translation. Student No. 13

skipped the prepositional phrase, *in his efforts*, in his translation of '....whose philosophy Dr. King used to study in his effort to liberate.....'

..... الذي كان قد درس فلسفته (كمنهج) لتحرير.....

VIA. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

To handle the above problems, we have to offer reasonable solutions to them. These solutions are inseparable! i.e. they should be taken as one body.

First, translators have to be familiar with and then master all classes of verbs and phrasal verbs and the most appropriate required preposition and their meanings.

For this purpose, they could consult Palmer (1987), Dixon (1991) and Quirk (1989),

to mention just a few references, whenever a need arises. Such phrasal verbs are cumbersome to memorise. The optimal method to adopt in this regard is through practice, which in turn reduces language interference as language experience increases. Practice is a guaranteed way to perfection.

Secondly, translators have to bear in mind that prepositions indicate three essential meanings or relations. These are temporal, location and abstract relations. In the hemisphere of teaching Pittnam (1966) believed that these meanings have to be taught in the same order given above. Regarding translator's learners and translators have to be fully aware of these meanings.¹²

Thirdly, translators should bear in mind that in this type of translation (Arabic-English and vice versa) they are handling two independent languages and cultures. Such languages include prepositions that share a number of meanings, but not all meanings. The example on the preposition *in* (mentioned earlier) clearly illustrates this point. There are cases where English requires a preposition while in

Arabic it is absent. In Roberts' translation of Beirut 75, she translated '

يَأْتِرُ أَهْبَانًا عَنِ الْوَهْمِ إِلَى كَلِمَةٍ ، لِأَنَّهُ يَتَذَكَّرُ فِي مَنْتَهَى الطَّرِيقِ أَنَّهُ نَسِيَ إِتْقَالَ فَرَا،

¹². Al-Khalousi (No Date:179) states that using abstract terms is a depreciated strategy in writing or translation.

as: 'sometimes he would be late for work because halfway there, it would occur to him that he hadn't locked his closet'.

In this piece of translation, the English translation has deleted two Arabic prepositions, namely *Can* and *fii*.

The same holds true in the case of an English text being translated into Arabic. Thus, these two sentences:

He visits me on Thursday.
He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1964.

have the following Arabic translation, respectively:

زارني يوم الخميس
منح جائزة نوبل عام ١٩٦٤

The Arabic translation does not show the English preposition *on* and *in* used above since they are not necessary in the Arabic translation.

Fourthly, computers may be of great advantage to translators in this regard. Phrasal verbs and their meanings may be store in the computers and translators may retrieve the required meaning that approximates the meaning of the phrasal verb in the source language. The bifurcation of verb + preposition combination will not be a problem here since this has been controlled by means of its meaning. Up to my knowledge this type of machine translation has not been tried. I strongly believe that computers are promising in language learning and would be of great advantage to translators.

VII. CONCLUSION

We have duly observed that prepositions and phrasal verbs superinduce a lot of problems while translating Arabic texts into English and vice versa. The problems are not cinch or docile, but by the same token they are avoidable. It requires a translator who is conversant of the structures of both languages and specifically of prepositions that the verb, noun or adjective requires. Computers could be promising, though up to our time the latter has fallen beyond our whims and expectations. I will not be surprised in the era of cloning to hear tomorrow that a machine could overcome most of the translation problems that pertain to translating preposition.

The present writer hopes that this paper would stimulate other linguists and translators to undertake similar steps to handle this problem and offer reasonable solutions and proposals.

English prepositions and their meaning

Preposition	Features
unto	x to
in	x direction
of	x recipient
for	x purpose
to	x duration
on	x condition
with	x manner
upon	x place
without	x position
within	x accompaniment
from	x instrument
among	x possession
behind	x about (attribution)
around	x subject-matter
down	x part of a whole
across	x adverbial
except	x specification
by	x means
towards	x representation
	x support
	x for
	x into
	x proportion
	x time-specific
	x on
	x lacking
	x inside
	x in
	x source
	x origin

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