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Subject: Translation

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Textbook: Ghazala, H. (2008). *Translation as Problems and Solutions: A Textbook for University Students and Trainee Translators*.

2024

Grammatical Problems

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Introduction

English and Arabic belong to two distinct language families—West Germanic and Semitic, respectively. This difference results in sharp contrasts between their grammatical structures, which often pose challenges in translation. A common mistake among students of translation is the assumption that English grammar can be directly mapped onto Arabic grammar. However, this is far from accurate. The grammatical differences between these languages require careful consideration to avoid errors in translation. This chapter will explore some of the most prominent grammatical challenges when translating from English to Arabic, providing suggested solutions for each problem.

Translation of the Verb "BE" (i.e., "am," "is," "are," "was," "were," "be," "been")

Problem 1: Literal Translation of "am," "is," "are"

One of the most frequent issues arises when students attempt to translate the English verbs "am," "is," and "are" literally into Arabic as "يكون". This approach often results in awkward and incorrect translations. For instance:

1. English: "I am a student."

   - Incorrect Literal Translation: "أنا أكون طالباً"

2. English: "She is kind."

   - Incorrect Literal Translation: "هي تكون لطيفة"

3. English: "You are a father."

   - Incorrect Literal Translation: "أنت تكون أباً"

Solution:In Arabic, the verb "be" ("am," "is," "are") is often omitted, turning the English verbal sentence into an Arabic nominal sentence, which consists of a topic and a comment.

This approach is more natural and grammatically correct in Arabic. The corrected translations would be:

1. English: "I am a student."

   - Correct Translation: "أنا طالب"

2. English: "She is kind."

   - Correct Translation: "هي لطيفة"

3. English: "You are a father."

   - Correct Translation: "أنت أب"

The verb "be" in these examples functions as an equative verb, essentially stating that one entity equals another (e.g., "I = student," "She = kind," "You = father"). In Arabic, this relationship is implied without the need for a verb, as the sentence structure naturally conveys this meaning.

Translation of "am," "is," "are" as Auxiliary Verbs

When "am," "is," and "are" are used as auxiliary verbs to form the present progressive tense or the present passive voice, students often incorrectly translate them literally. Consider the following examples:

a. Present Progressive Tense:

1. English: "I am leaving now."

   - Incorrect Literal Translation: "أنا أكون مغادراً الآن"

2. English: "He is eating an apple."

   - Incorrect Literal Translation: "هو يكون يأكل تفاحة"

3. English: "We are speaking English."

   - Incorrect Literal Translation: "نحن نكون نتحدث الإنجليزية"

Correct Translations:

1. English: "I am leaving now."

   - Correct Translation: "أنا أغادر الآن"

2. English: "He is eating an apple."

  - Correct Translation: "هو يأكل تفاحة"

3. English: "We are speaking English."

  - Correct Translation: "نحن نتحدث الإنجليزية"

In Arabic, the progressive tense is typically indicated by context, such as using time indicators like "الآن" (al-ān) meaning "now," rather than through a specific grammatical structure. The auxiliary verb "be" is unnecessary and is therefore omitted in the translation.

b. Present Passive Voice:

1. English: "I am given another chance."

  - Incorrect Literal Translation: "أنا أكون معطى فرصة أخرى"

2. English: "She is invited to the party."

  - Incorrect Literal Translation: "هي تكون مدعوة إلى الحفلة"

3. English: "They are put in the same situation."

  - Incorrect Literal Translation: "هم يكونون موضوعين في نفس الوضع"

Correct Translations:

1. English: "I am given another chance."

  - Correct Translation: "أُعطيت فرصة أخرى"

2. English: "She is invited to the party."

  - Correct Translation: "دُعيت إلى الحفلة"

3. English: "They are put in the same situation."

  - Correct Translation: "وضعوا في نفس الوضع"

In Arabic, the present passive voice does not typically use auxiliary verbs like "am," "is," or "are." Instead, the passive meaning is conveyed through verb forms or context, making the use of "be" unnecessary and often incorrect.

In Arabic, the verb "be" in its various forms ("am," "is," "are") is often omitted, especially when it functions as a main verb or auxiliary verb. This omission reflects the grammatical differences between English and Arabic, where Arabic does not require an equivalent for the English "be" to convey the same meaning. Understanding these differences is crucial for producing accurate translations and avoiding common pitfalls associated with literal translation.

Problem 2: Literal Translation of "was" and "were" into "يكون"

Similar to the issue with translating "am," "is," and "are," the past simple forms of the verb "be"—"was" and "were"—are often translated literally into Arabic as "يكون" . This approach is problematic both when these verbs function as main verbs and when they are used as auxiliary verbs.

a. As Main Verbs:

1. English: "The child was ill."

   - Incorrect Literal Translation: "كان الطفل مريضاً"

2. English: "The bird was beautiful."

   - Incorrect Literal Translation: "كان الطائر جميلاً"

3. English: "The players were one team."

   - Incorrect Literal Translation: "كان اللاعبون فريقاً واحداً"

b. As Auxiliary Verbs: The Past Progressive Tense

1. English: "Her mother was preparing lunch."

   - Incorrect Literal Translation: "كانت والدتها تحضر الغداء"

2. English: "My brother was writing a letter."

   - Incorrect Literal Translation: "كان أخي يكتب رسالة"

3. English: "Our guests were praying."

   - Incorrect Literal Translation: "كان ضيوفنا يصلون"

c. The Past Passive Voice:

Literal translation of "was" and "were" becomes particularly problematic when these verbs are used as auxiliaries to form the past passive voice. In such cases, a direct translation often sounds awkward or unnatural in Arabic.

1. English: "The food was eaten."

   - Incorrect Literal Translation: "تم أكل الطعام"

2. English: "I was deceived."

   - Incorrect Literal Translation: "تم خداعي"

3. English: "The boys were dismissed."

   - Incorrect Literal Translation: "تم فصل الأولاد"

Solution:

In Arabic, the verbs "was" and "were" ("كان" and its variations) can often be omitted, especially in the past passive voice, to produce a more natural and grammatically correct translation.

1. English: "The food was eaten."

   - Correct Translation: "أُكل الطعام"

2. English: "I was deceived."

   - Correct Translation: "خُدعت"

3. English: "The boys were dismissed."

   - Correct Translation: "فُصل الأولاد"

By omitting the literal translation of "was" and "were" and instead focusing on the natural grammatical structures of Arabic, the translation becomes clearer and more aligned with Arabic usage.