

# Syntactic Difficulties Arabic Speakers Encounter While Learning English

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**Abstract**— This paper is about difficulties Arab learners encounter when they learn English as their foreign language.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

“Arabic has had well established theoretical studies for more than 1000 years” (AL-Muhtaseb, n.d.). Arabic is one of the oldest world languages and it is spoken officially in more than 20 countries by nearly 30 million people. Arabic also has important value because of its religious status for Muslims around the world. Muslims have to learn Arabic in order to worship God and to read the Quran. The Quran is the book that was sent to the Prophet Mohammad that contains the message for all Muslims about how they should worship God and explains some life manners. Thus, Arabic for thousands of years has had one formal form in the way that it is written, although spoken Arabic has many regional variations.

## 2 Problems AND SECTIONS

### SECTION 1

#### Word Roots Differences

One problem that Arab speakers encounter when learning English is word roots. In English, there are different roots that change the word's form slightly when it appears in one of these forms or cases: noun, verb, adjective, and adverb. A verb has three forms, present, past, and past participle, such as *see, saw, seen*; also there is the present form of the present participle verb + ing, such as *eating*. These differences are not easily understandable since they do not exist in Arabic. However, in Arabic different sexes have very different prefixes and suffixes. For example:

Male verb	Female verb
<i>he writes</i> (English)	<i>she writes</i>
(English)	
<i>ykttb</i> (Arabic)	<i>taktb</i>
(Arabic)	

#### Nouns and Possessive Forms

Possessive form is one of the problems that Arab speakers encounter while learning English. In English the forms *his, her, their, its, and our* are used to refer to the possession of objects or feelings by a subject or an object. However, in Arabic there are two genders that give nouns different forms. According to Kaye (2009), “Modern standard Arabic nouns are inflected for case, determination, gender and number.” Arabic, masculine and feminine affect the noun ending, which confuse Arab learners because in Arabic there are different forms for the possessive for either male or female. For instance, for a male, it would be said for a singular book that it belongs to a man *ktabh*, but *ktabha* for a book that belongs to a female. In Arabic, possessive is part of the subject, unlike in English where it comes separately.

Additionally, Arabic nouns are pluralized when there are three or more of a noun. For instance, *three books or more* in Arabic are considered plural and the noun is written *kotb*. Also in Arabic, when there is a dual as well as plural form of a noun, such as *two books*, there will be different suffixes for the noun; so *two books* in English will be translated in Arabic to *kataban*. However, in the case that we have only *two books*, Arabic calls for a dual form of the noun. It has yet a different form for the plural. On the other hand, in English, the plural is when there are two or more of a noun.

### SECTION 2

### Word Order and Sentence Structure in Arabic and English

According to Al-Muhtaseb (n.d.), "The Arabic sentence is usually divided into two main parts: the pillar and the supplement (adjunct), if any. The pillar could be mapped to the notion of the *nuclear* in rhetorical structure theory." Nominal sentences in Arabic start with a noun and it has an adjective in the sentence. This kind of sentence has a different word order in English and Arabic. For example:

*A blue book* (English)

*Ktab Ahmer* (Arabic) [*Book blue*] (literal translation from Arabic to English)

As Badr, Zbib, and Glass (2009, pp. 86) stated about Arabic, "the main sentence usually has the order Verb-Subject-Object (VSO). The order Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) also occurs, but is less frequent than VSO. The verb agrees with the subject in gender and number in the SVO order, but only in gender in the VSO order." Because of the complication of sentence word order in Arabic, students encounter difficulties using the order (SVO) in English because the sentence subject-verb-object orders can have different sentence forms in Arabic but English sentences cannot have VSO. For example:

(SVO): *Mohammad eats banana every day* (English)

*Mohammad yakl mozh kol*

*yoom* (Arabic)

(VSO): *Eats Mohammad banana every day*

(English VSO)

### REFERENCE

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*Yakl Mohammad mozh kl*

*yoom* (Arabic)

Likewise, word order in various phrases causes confusion for Arabic-speaking learners of English. Noun + adjective order and well as subject + verb order are different. In English, the subject comes before the verb, while in Arabic the verb usually comes first followed by its subject. In some cases, the subject does not come right after the verb, such as in a passive sentence. An example subject and verb order in a sentence in Arabic:

*He plays soccer every weekend.* (English)

*Hoa ylab al korah kol asbooa* (Arabic)

*[Plays he soccer every weekend.]* (Literal translation from

Arabic to English)

### 3 CONCLUSION

All in all, there are several major differences between Arabic and English in grammar. There are problematic factors that challenge Arabic learners of English, such as word derivation, sentence structure, and verb tenses. They might encounter these difficulties differently according to their age and educational system. In most Arabic-speaking countries, there is a focus on emphasizing grammar more than the other skills while teaching English. Since there is little focus on other aspects of the language, and writing skills in particular, learners will continue to experience most of these problems even though they study English for years.