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Preposition in English and Arabic:
A Comparative Study

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بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

(يَرْفَعُ اللّٰهُ الَّذِیْنَ اٰمَنُوْا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِیْنَ اٰتَوْا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجٰتٍ
وَاللّٰهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُوْنَ خَبِیْرٌ)

صَدَقَ اللّٰهُ الْعَلِیُّ الْعَظِیْمُ

Dedication

To my father and my mother

Acknowledgement

I want to thank my supervisor for all the help

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Introduction

Prepositions, those small but essential words, play a vital role in both English and Arabic languages. They establish relationships between words within a sentence, indicating concepts of time, location, direction, and other abstract associations. Examples like "on," "in," "under," "of," and "from" in English, and their Arabic counterparts like "في" (fee), "على" (ala), and "من" (min) demonstrate their fundamental importance. However, despite their shared grammatical purpose, prepositions in English and Arabic exhibit notable differences in their usage, number, and complexity. This comparative study explores the key similarities and contrasts between prepositions in English and Arabic, highlighting areas of potential difficulty for language learners.

Similarities

- **Function:** At their core, prepositions in both English and Arabic serve the same fundamental purpose—to link nouns, pronouns, and phrases within a sentence, providing essential context and meaning.
- **Types:** Both languages possess prepositions that denote time (e.g., "before", "since", "قبل" (qabl), "بعد" (ba'd)), location (e.g., "under", "behind", "تحت" (taht), "خلف" (khalf)), and direction (e.g., "to", "toward", "إلى" (ila), "نحو" (nahw)).

Notable Differences

- **Number of Prepositions:** English boasts a significantly larger inventory of prepositions compared to Arabic. This means Arabic learners often use a smaller set of prepositions with broader meanings, sometimes needing to rely on context to determine precise meanings.
- **Polysemy and Idiomatic Use:** English prepositions often display a wider range of meanings (polysemy) and participate in numerous idiomatic expressions. For example, the preposition "over" can express location, time, movement, authority, and is used in phrases like "all over the place." This complexity presents challenges for Arabic speakers learning English.
- **Phrasal Verbs:** In English, prepositions frequently combine with verbs to form phrasal verbs (e.g., "give up", "look after"), creating new meanings

that can be difficult to deduce literally. This concept is less common in Arabic, posing an additional challenge for learners.

The differences between English and Arabic prepositions can be a significant source of errors for language learners. Arabic-speaking students of English may struggle with the polysemy of English prepositions and their use in phrasal verbs. Conversely, English speakers learning Arabic may find it challenging to grasp the nuances of a smaller set of prepositions with broader meanings.

Understanding the similarities and differences between prepositions in English and Arabic is essential to avoid common errors and for effective communication across both languages. This comparative study illuminates the complexities present in prepositional usage, emphasizing the importance of focused attention to this grammatical element in language learning contexts.

Chapter One

Prepositions in English

1.1 Introduction

prepositions are words normally placed before nouns or pronouns. Prepositions can also be followed by verbs that must be in the gerund form prepositions are generally used to show the relationship between its object and other words in the sentence. Prepositional phrase at the minimum a prepositional phrase will begin with a preposition and end with a noun ,pronoun ,gerund or clause the object of the preposition . The object of the preposition will often have one or more modifiers to describe it . these are the patterns for a prepositional phrase English and Arabic do not derive from the same language family, English belongs to the Indo-European language family, whereas Arabic is a Semitic language. English contains some simple and complex prepositions, and Arabic encloses separable and inseparable prepositions. (Hamdallah & Tushyeh, 1993, 182).

1.2 Types of Preposition:

1.2.1 Prepositions of Time

Preposition of time is used to say or indicate when something happens. There are several prepositions that can be used as the preposition of time (Dignen, et al 2007:153) , as:

(on, in, at, before, after, until/till, for, since, during, from to, and by)

All of the preposition above cannot be used in the same situation in other word, each preposition has its own rule which settle when to use it correctly

Use "in" with parts of the day (not specific times), months, years, and seasons.

- **He reads in the evening.**
- **The weather is cold in December.**

Use "at" with the time of day. Also use "at" with noon, night, and midnight.

- **I go to work at 8:00.**
- **He eats lunch at noon.**

Use "on" with days.

- **I work on Saturdays.**
- **He does laundry on Wednesdays. (Dignen, et al 2007:153)**

To refer to extended time, use the prepositions "since," "for," "by," "during," "from...to," "from...until," "with," and "within."

- **I have lived in Minneapolis since 2005.**
- **He will be in Toronto for 3 weeks.**
- **She will finish her homework by 6:00.**
- **He works part time during the summer.**
- **I will collect data from January to June.**
- **They are in school from August until May.**
- **She will graduate within 2 years. (Dignen, et al 2007:156)**

1.2.2 Prepositions of Place

According to Dignen et al (2007:151)The second kind of preposition is prepositions to shows the place. Preposition of place is used to tell someone where someone else or something there are some prepositions that can be used to talk about location; they are in, on, at, near, under, between, beside, among, above, and below.

- **They will meet in the lunchroom.**
- **She was waiting at the corner.**
- **He left his phone on the bed.**
- **Place the pen inside the drawer. (Dignen et al 2007:151)**

To refer to an object close to a point, use the prepositions "by," "near," "next to," "between," "among," and "opposite."

- **The gas station is by the grocery store.**
- **The park is near her house.**
- **Park your bike next to the garage.**
- **There is a deer between the two trees.**
- **There is a purple flower among the weeds.**
- **The garage is opposite the house. (Dignen, et al 2007:158)**

1.2.3 Intransitive Prepositions

As argued by Emonds (1985:34) , adverbs such as home, downstairs, and afterward or post-verbal particles seem to be better treated as prepositions. It is not difficult to note that post-verbal particles behave just like ordinary prepositional phrases, too:

_Tom ran into the opera house.

1.2.4 Transitive Prepositions

Central prepositions in English select a noun phrase as its complement and cannot have a that-clause or an infinitive clause as a complement:

_He was surprised at (that) she noticed him.

_ He was surprised at to see her.

_ He stayed at home because of the strike.

_ He fell out of the window.

_ Few people outside of the immediate family know.

_ Sam disappeared down into the darkness.

_Tom pushed John up against the ropes.

_The ice is over under the bridge.

Even there are cases that we might think the prepositions just take a noun phrase only.(Bennet ;1975: 4-5)

1.2.5 Ditransitive Prepositions

In the same spirit, it is assumed that there exists ditransitive prepositions such as from, down, and into (Jackendoff ;1973:90). Examples in illustrate this point:

_The mice raced from one end of the part to the other.

_An old man lumbered down the street toward the frightened child.

_A drunken pianist staggered into the smoky room from out of the cold.

1.2.6 Multiclasses

The observations also imply that just like verbs, one preposition also can have different sub-categorization information:

_Tom jumped out of the bushes.

_Tom ran out the door.

_Tom jumped out.

(Hall 1986: 4)

1.2.7 One-word Prepositions

Aboard

- We went aboard the boat.
- Is there a doctor aboard the plane?

About

- What do you think about Mary?
- Let's talk about something different.
- I've just read a book about President Kennedy.

Above

- We are flying above the clouds.
- We live in the hills, 1,000 meters above sea-level.

Across

- We drove across the desert.
- The dog ran across the road.

Against

- Did you vote for or against the suggestion?
- He put his bicycle against the wall.

Along

- We walked along the beach for two miles.

There are trees along the road. (Hall 1986)

1.2.8 Prepositions of Path

Some grammarians have made a sharp distinction between prepositions of place and „prepositions of path“ (or prepositions of „direction“, or of „movement“, or of „motion“) (Palmberg,2000, 113). A preposition of path can highlight one of the following aspects of a path of movement:

1) Its end:

_ Put the bread in the oven

2) Its beginning:

_The sound came from the house beginning.

3) Its orientation, and whether the distance between the Subject and the Landmark is increasing or decreasing

_We headed toward town.

4) Is the Moon moving away from the Earth? Yes it is, but very slowly.

5) An intermediate point or location:

_I stopped by his place intermediate location

Broadly speaking, prepositions of place can be used as prepositions of path and vice versa. For any preposition which locates a Subject in space or describes a path („a change of location in space“), the blanket term is spatial preposition (Palmberg,2000; 115).

1.2.9 Double Preposition

Double prepositions are two (prepositional) words which are joined together to connect nouns, pronouns, and phrases with other words in sentence. (Palmberg,2000).

(Outside of, out of, from behind, up to, next to, because of, according to, etc.)

- Suddenly he emerged from behind the curtain.
- The match between Pakistan and India was delayed due to rain.
- Nobody outside of this class should know about the plan.
- According to the news reporter, the weather will be cloudy today.
- Next to skiing my favorite sport is skating.

1.2.10 Participle Preposition

Participle preposition are verbs + ing that function as a preposition in a sentence is called participle preposition.

1.2.11 Common Participle Preposition:

(Barring, considering, during, following, including, etc.)

- Barring accidents, we should arrive on time.
- He took charge of the family business following his father's death.
- No one should talk during the class.

1.2.12 Phrase Prepositions (Prepositional Phrase)

Phrase preposition is a phrase containing a preposition and functions as a preposition in a sentence and connects nouns, pronouns, or other phrase toothier words in a sentence.

1.2.13 Common Phrase Prepositions:

(On behalf of, on account of, with regard to, in spite of, to the fact that etc.)

- I am playing in the team on behalf of captain today.
- He succeeded by means of perseverance.
- We could not win the match in spite of playing good.
- Natural honey has been used for centuries on account of their healing properties.

1.3 Functions of Preposition

prepositions are crucial for expressing spatial relationships. They tell us where something is located or the direction in which it is moving. For instance, the sentence, "The cat hid under the table," employs the preposition "under" to denote the cat's position relative to the table (Smith, 2010, p. 45). Similarly, prepositions like "to," "from," "through," and "across" describe various types of movement and directionality.

Prepositions are also indispensable for indicating temporal relationships. They help us understand when something happened or the duration of an event. In the sentence "The concert starts at 8 PM," the preposition "at" pinpoints the specific time the concert is scheduled to begin (Leech, 2004, p. 68). Other prepositions like "during," "before," "after," and "since" allow us to situate events in relation to each other on a timeline.

prepositions function to convey a variety of logical relationships between ideas. Consider the sentence, "She argued in favor of the proposal." Here, the preposition "of" connects the verb "argued" with the object of the argument, "the proposal" (Biber et al., 1999, p. 74). Prepositions such as "with," "against," "about," and "despite" similarly establish connections between concepts, clarifying how elements in a sentence relate to each other.

prepositions can play an idiomatic role within the English language. In these instances, prepositions are combined with verbs or other parts of speech to create phrases with meanings that are not purely the sum of their parts. For example, the phrasal verb "look up to" means to respect or admire, which goes beyond the literal meaning of "look" or "up" (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1151)..

Chapter Two

Prepositions in Arabic

2.1 Introduction

There are many differences between English and Arabic prepositions. Prepositions in Arabic are much less in number than their English counterparts (Al-Marrani , 2009:56). English language comprises about one hundred prepositions (Leacock et al, 2014:54) whereas, in Arabic the number of prepositions is about (29) (Aldahesh, 2013:90).

2.2 Forms of Prepositions in Arabic

According to Saeed, (2014:90), Arabic prepositions can be classified into two primary classes: true prepositions and semi prepositions. More details on the two classes of prepositions are discussed below.

1-True prepositions: This class contains the structures of language that function only as prepositions. True prepositions can be additionally subdivided into two types based on the number of letters that each preposition includes. Separable prepositions and Inseparable prepositions.

2- Semi-prepositions: This type is characterized being multi-functional and comprising language structures that can function as nouns, adverbs and prepositions.

2.3 Functions of Prepositions in Arabic

Arabic prepositions perform different functions in the sentence. Firstly, they serve to link a noun to another noun or a noun phrase to reveal the relationship between the two. It is worth noting that the parts; functions of prepositions and usages of prepositions are clarified with English examples alongside word for word transliteration. Transliteration is rather significant in order to illustrate how prepositions are used in Arabic.

Example:

1- Ahmed is **in** the school.

احمد في المدرسة

In the sentence above, the preposition in links the noun Ahmed to the other noun 'al-madrasah (school). Arabic prepositions are also used to relate a noun or a noun phrase to a verb in the sentence to reveal the correlation between them. Al-Marrani (2009:87)

2.4 Usages of prepositions in Arabic

According to Saeed, (2014), Arabic prepositions can be classified in these types :

من / From, Some of or One of

This prepositions refers to initiating an action from some place, or it can mean “some of”. It can also refer to the gender or species meaning “one of”.

Example:

I walked from my home to school. / مشيت من البيت الى المدرسة

A cup of coffee in Arabic / فنجان من القهوة

I spent from (= some of) my savings. / انفقنت من مدخراتي

إلى / To or At

This preposition refers to destination.

Example:

The train arrived at (got to) the station. / وصل القطار الى المحطة

عن \From or About

This preposition means “about” or “awayfrom” something or someone.

Example:

I read a book about Naguib Mahfouz. / قرأت كتابا عن نجيب محفوظ

I walked away from the grass. / مشيت بعيدا عن الحشائش

(Saeed 2014)

على / On or Above

This preposition refers to the top place of something and means “on”. Example:

The book is on the desk. / الكتاب على المكتب

في / Fee / In or Into

This preposition refers to something happening inside.

Example:

There are a few students in the classroom. \ يوجد القلي من الطلاب في الفصل \

الباء / By, With, In or At

This preposition can refer to the reason meaning “by”, or it can mean

“with“. It can also refer to the place meaning “in” or “at“. Example:

You succeed by working hard. / تنجح بالعمل الجاد

With science, you build minds. / بالعلم تبني العقول

Mohammad is at home. / محمد بالبيت

The friends meet in the club. / يجتمع الاصدقاء بالنادي

الكاف / ك / Like or As

This preposition expresses simile التشبيه meaning “like” or “as“.

Example:

False hopes are like a mirage. / الاماني الخادعة كالسراب

He works like a machine. / هو يعمل كالالة

Time is like a sword / الوقت كالسيف

(Dignent, et al, 2007:76)

اللام / To or For

This preposition can refer to the reason or the possession.

Example:

Students go to school to learn (for learning). / يذهب الناس للمدرسة للتعلم.

Success is for the hard-working / النجاح للمجتهدين

حتى / Until

This preposition refers to finishing something or the end of something.

Example:

People learn until they die. / يتعلم الناس حتى يموتون

و / And

This is used when there are multiple items to be listed. Apples and oranges are my favorite fruits

التفاح والبرتقال من الفواكه المفضلة لدي

(Dignent, et al, 2007:76)

Chapter Three

3.1 Comparison between English and Arabic Prepositions

The use of prepositions can vary greatly between Arabic and English, and it is often the case that the worldview of speakers of both languages determines the prepositions they use, which of course depends on context.

For example, where Arabic speakers use „in“ to refer to days, English speakers use „on“, instead, Emonds (1985:84) .

The first prepositions to look at is “**on**”:

(On)

The most obvious use for this preposition, that is the position „on top of“ of an object in relation to a surface, is the same in both languages.

1- The cup is on the desk.

الكوب على الطاولة

However, „on“ can also be used to refer to moving surfaces or objects, such as buses and planes.

2- I“m on the bus.

In Arabic, "على" ala (on) is never used to express this concept. Instead, في fi (in) is used.

So, the same example would be expressed in Arabic as:

I“m on the bus.

انا في الباص

The third way in which the English preposition „on“ is used is in reference to the time. For example: Bennet (1975: 70)

3- I“ll visit you on Monday.

In Arabic, the concept is also expressed differently. In Arabic, one could either use في fi (in) to refer to days:

I“ll visit you on Monday.

سأزورك في يوم الاثنين

Or one could get rid of the preposition altogether. For example:

I'll visit you on Monday.

سأزورك يوم الاثنين

The second instance (no preposition) is usually preferred to the one with 'fi' in it.

The second preposition to look at today is: (About)

When „about“ is generally used to talk about a topic or a subject matter, which is the most common usage, things are straightforward and both languages express the idea in the same way. As you can see in the next example, the simple equivalent to "about" in Arabic is "an".

1- I talked about Ahmed today

تكلت عن احمد اليوم

About can also be combined with the adjective „mad“ to create the adjective phrase „mad about“. In Arabic, however, we use " — " **bi** and not عن "an".

For example:

2- She's mad about Mike.

هي مجنونة بمايك

Finally, and while "about" is again used to refer to „estimation of value“, there's again another preposition in Arabic that is specifically used for this concept that is **حوالي** "hawaali" (approximately).

3-There are about twenty people.

هنالك حوالي عشرين شخص

(Ibid:76)

3.2 Differences and similarities

English and Arabic refer to two distinct language families. While the former belongs to Germanic languages, the latter belongs to Semitic family .Therefore, it is expected that the two languages have two different prepositional systems. In an attempt to understand the differences and similarities between prepositions in English and Arabic, the researcher conducted a cross -linguistic comparison between prepositions in the two languages.

According to Quirk ,et al. (1985, p. 673) , “ preposition expresses a relation between two entities, one being that represented by the prepositional complement, the other by another part of the sentence”. With reference to the quotation above, a preposition has the function of connecting two parts of speech in the sentence. Usually the preposition is followed by its complement in a construction called prepositional phrase (PP) where the preposition links its complement or direct object to another part of speech in the sentence such as nouns, verbs or adjectives.

The Differences

- 1.Prepositions in Arabic are much less in number than their English counterparts . English language comprises about one hundred prepositions whereas, in Arabic the number of prepositions is about twenty.
2. English prepositions can be grouped into simple and complex whereas, in Arabic there is no such classification; all prepositions are simple.
3. Many of the English prepositions are not considered as prepositions in Arabic but

adverbs or semi- prepositions such as down, beneath, below, up, over and above.

4. In English language, the Prepositions are always free morphemes but In Arabic it sometimes comes as an affixes (prefix) attached to the noun. 5. Some Arabic prepositions have more than one meaning like the preposition (في-Fii) and it has many meanings like: At, On, All over, To...

6. Sometimes, the meaning of the preposition differs between Arabic and English according to its meaning like in the examples:

- **Mohammad arrived on time .**

محمد وصل في الوقت

7. Sometimes the meaning of the preposition differs in the same language like in English the following example:

- **This interview is about world economics**

8. In English language, the pronoun that follows the preposition must be in the object state like the example:

- **Shadi offered the present to him**

9. Some English prepositions have various states when translated into Arabic such As the English preposition "of"

The Similarities:

1. There are similarities between the rules of mother tongue and second language, there is positive transfer which is called facilitation. the first language of the learner may facilitate the development process of learning a second language by helping him to progress more rapidly along the universal route when the first language is similar to the second language.

2. In both languages the preposition doesnot have a dependent meaning and it cannot stand alone.

Conclusion

A comparative study of English and Arabic prepositions reveals both fascinating parallels and significant divergences between the two languages. While both utilize prepositions to establish relationships between words within a sentence, profound differences exist in their form, function, and frequency.

One distinction lies in the sheer number of prepositions. English boasts a considerably broader vocabulary of prepositions, offering more nuanced ways to express spatial, temporal, and logical relationships. In contrast, Arabic operates with a more limited set of prepositions, often relying on context and inflection to convey the nuances that English achieves through dedicated prepositions. Furthermore, English prepositions exhibit a high degree of versatility, with single prepositions carrying multiple meanings and functions. For example, the preposition "on" can indicate location ("the book is on the table"), time ("she arrived on Tuesday"), or a state of being ("the project is on hold"). Arabic prepositions, while also possessing some flexibility, tend to have more specific and restricted applications. Another significant difference lies in how the two languages construct prepositional phrases. English commonly utilizes a "preposition + object" pattern, while Arabic frequently employs a system of bound prepositions that attach directly to the nouns or pronouns they modify. This structural contrast can create challenges for Arabic learners of English and vice-versa.

Despite these differences, prepositions in both English and Arabic fulfill the fundamental role of linking phrases and clarifying the relationships between concepts. Understanding the similarities and divergences in their use is crucial for effective communication and translation between these two rich languages.

This comparative study has pedagogical implications for language instruction in both English and Arabic. Language teachers can utilize the findings to highlight potential areas of difficulty for learners. By anticipating where Arabic speakers might struggle with the broader range of English prepositions and their multiple meanings, instructors can develop tailored teaching strategies and exercises. Similarly, English

speakers learning Arabic would benefit from focused attention on the system of bound prepositions and their more defined usage patterns.

In conclusion, this examination of prepositions in English and Arabic underscores the intricate and diverse ways that languages express fundamental grammatical relationships. It highlights the importance of cross-linguistic studies for a deeper understanding of how languages work and for facilitating accurate and meaningful communication across cultures.

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