A Contrastive Analysis of English and Arabic Phrasal Verbs: Difficulties and Alternatives

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Abstract: *The present paper aims at investigating how the phrasal verb system of Arabic differs from that of English in an attempt to discover some factors, intrinsic or extrinsic, that may explain why native speakers of Arabic find it difficult to acquire the English system. It may be very fruitful, at least from a pedagogical/TESLO point of view, to understand the rationale of the two systems, so as to predict areas of transfer and interference. In addition, as some phrasal verbs become highly idiomatic in the course of time, understanding the other language system may help shed light upon the way nonnative speakers should be instructed in the target language as far as the phrasal verb system is concerned.*

Keywords: Phrasal Verb/ English as a Foreign language/ EFL/ Saudi Learners/ English Phrasal verb/Arabic Phrasal verb/approaches

1. Introduction

Although phrasal verbs are found in Arabic in examples like *YaTHHak min* (lit. laugh from) and *YaTHHak ?ala* (lit. laugh at), Arab second language learners of English, even at advanced stages, find it difficult to acquire the English phrasal verb system not only in production, but in reception and comprehension. As a remedy strategy, nonnative speakers of English (Arabs in our case) avoid using those two-word verbs[1], though their choice of the latinate alternative is oftentimes unsuccessful. From the perspective of second language learners of English, an English phrasal verb is usually placed in one of three categories: (1) transparent phrasal verbs: where the verb and the particle both "make sense" (e.g., knock down), (2) opaque phrasal verbs: where neither of them 'makes sense' (e.g., pin down), and (3) translucent phrasal verbs: where only one of the two parts (either the verb or the particle) makes sense (e.g., write down). Opaque and Translucent phrasal verbs constitute the greatest difficulty to Arabs second learners of English. Transparent phrasal verbs are less demanding. Traditional methods of language teaching assume that the relationship between the verb and the particle is mostly random. Within that framework, it was almost futile to try to look for a relationship whatsoever. A nonnative speaker of the language was thus advised to compile long lists of phrasal verbs (patterned according to the verb, of course) that s/he was required to 'learn by heart' (Side, 1990: 144). Recent work in this area has, however, shown that such relationships are not random (cf. Lakoff and Johnson1980; Side 1990; Fraser 1976; inter alia). The creativity of the language in this particular aspect is just one piece of evidence to support this view- -that is, since new phrasal verbs can be introduced into the lexicon of the language, then it must be based upon already existing relationship(s), though that cannot be easily grasped. All you need do in this case is "think laterally, metaphorically, or even pictorially" (Side 1990: 147). When adopting this second approach, phrasal verbs, at least for pedagogical purposes, are patterned according to the particle (Side 1990). Implicit in this line of thought is the claim that a big part of the meaning is contained in the particle, especially as students are encouraged to figure out what is common between all phrasal verbs with the same particle (e.g. break out, walk out, let out, put out, missed out, etc.)

2. Research Purpose

The present paper aims at investigating how the phrasal verb system of Arabic differs from that of English in an attempt to discover some factors, intrinsic or extrinsic, that may explain why native speakers of Arabic find it difficult to acquire the English system. It may be very fruitful, at least from a pedagogical/TESLO point of view, to understand the rationale of the two systems, so as to predict areas of transfer and interference. In addition, as some phrasal verbs become highly idiomatic in the course of time, understanding the other language system may help shed light upon the way nonnative speakers should be instructed in the target language as far as the phrasal verb system is concerned.

3. Research Title

A Contrastive Analysis of English and Arabic Phrasal Verbs: Difficulties and Alternatives

4. Research Questions

a) Why do Arab English Learners find it difficult to acquire English phrasal verb?
b) Why do nonnative speakers of English avoid using English Phrasal verb?
c) Does Arabic Phrasal Verb system differ than English?
d) Do the differences between Arabic and English phrasal verb systems affect acquiring the English one ?

5. Research Objectives

a) To investigate how the phrasal verb system of Arabic differs from that of English.
b) To discover some factors that may explain why native speakers of Arabic find it difficult to acquire the English system.

c) To discuss the old approaches to learn English Phrasal verb.
d) To Suggest new methods and approaches to facilitate the learning process of English phrasal verb

6. Methodology

Some English phrasal verbs are contrasted with their Arabic translations, and vice versa. The purpose is to see how the two languages make use of different (or the same) metaphors to encode meaning in phrasal verb forms. The present study then sets out with the following hypotheses:
Hypothesis 1: Some meanings are phrasal-verbed in one language, but not in the other (Cf. English: grow up, hang up, bring about, turn on, turn off, write down, make up[mind], versus Arabic: tanaazala la, sa'ima min, etc.)

Hypothesis 2: Some meanings are phrasal-verbed in the two languages by making use of the same metaphor (English: cope with, go without versus Arabic yata'aglam ma?, yathhab biduun). [1Examples like "yathhab biduun" are not considered phrasal verbs in Arabic at all. The reason was that traditional Arab grammarians looked on the second part of the phrasal verb "biduun" as consisting of a]

Hypothesis 3: some meanings are phrasal-verbed in both languages by making use of different metaphors (English look up, hang up on, versus Arabic yastaxrij min, yu?alig ?ala, etc)

**English Phrasal verbs: Sources of Difficulty**
As an Arab second language learner of English, over a very long time I kept using the English verb "share" in sentences like " I shared my friends the meal", "She shares her friend the room", etc. Unfortunately, none of my teachers corrected me, until an a female friend of mine drew my attention to the fact that the English verb "share" is used with the preposition "with". She commented on the mistake by saying "you can't share someone, you share something with someone". After that time, I think I never made the mistake again. However, the worst was yet to come. When I was introduced to the idea of phrasal verbs ("a verb and a preposition", the teacher said, "happen to go together") for the first time after so many years of learning the language, I recalled "share with", and volunteered to give it as an example. Once more, unfortunately, the teacher did not draw my attention to the fact that this is a prepositional verb. So I kept confusing the two categories.

English Phrasal verb System Phrasal verbs are usually defined as two-word verbs, where the first part is a lexical verb and the second part a particle. However, the most noticeable feature of this combination is the fact that the meaning of this combination is not the sum of the meaning of both the verb and the particle; otherwise, the combination is no longer a phrasal verb. Consider the following examples: 1(a) She ran across the street (b) He called up the street 2(a) She ran across an old friend (b) He called up the boss Whereas "run across" and "'call up" in (1) are prepositional verbs, they are phrasal verbs in (2) above. Consequently, "across" and "up", for example, can function as prepositions, forming one unit with the following noun phrase; meanwhile, they can function as particles forming

one unit with the preceding verb. Their syntactic behavior is best clarified in tree-diagrams like 3(a) and 3(b), respectively: 3(a) Preposition
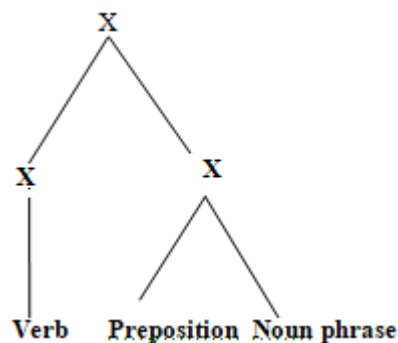
(b) Particle
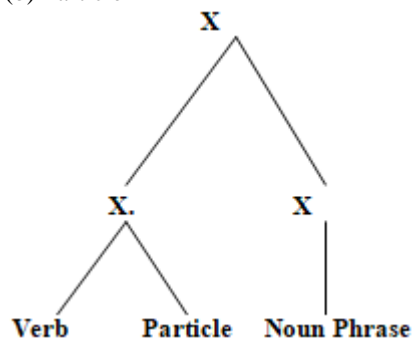
The source of difficulty for nonnative speaker of English (Arabs in this case) is twofold: 1) inability to make generalizations whether the second part of the functions as a particle, or as a preposition, and 2) inability to figure out the meaning of the combination if it is a particle; hence, it is idiomatic. However, in cases where the second part functions as a preposition, Arab second language learners find almost no difficulty in figuring out the meaning. This is best clarified in cases where the combination is ambiguous between the two readings:

4(a) He looked up the street
The most obvious reading of this sentence to an Arab second language learner of English is that he was looking up the street to see someone, for example (Burton-Roberts 1997). The second reading where he was trying to locate the street in a street atlas does not become part of the English of native speakers of Arabic unless they are explicitly instructed to 'learn it by heart'. In other words, his second language ability in this regard is not productive. One reason, I believe, is that unlike native speakers, second language learners look at sentences (a) an 5(b) below as if they were variations of the same structure, expressing the same meaning:

5(a) He looked up it
 (b) He looked it up

To the nonnative speaker who is usually introduced to the language through formal instructions, apart from context or even any pragmatic clues, there is nothing in both sentences that make them distinguishable.

One thing a nonnative speaker can benefit from when consulting the literature about this particular aspect is the fact that not all prepositions can function as particles. At, for, from, and with do not function as particles. [Although some texts assert this fact (The Grammar book, p. 265), others (cf. Index to Modern English, p.401-2), include *for* and *with* within the list.] However, although this might help at the theoretical level, it is, practically speaking, meaningless.

Another thing is the fact that only particles, not prepositions, can exchange positions with the following the direct object:
6(a) he got the book back
(b) he got back the book

To the nonnative speaker, there are three problems as far as the well-formedness of (6a) and (6b) above is concerned. First, a nonnative speaker of English cannot decide whether the structure on which movement has applied is well-formed4 . Another reason is intrinsic; that is, there are some English phrasal verbs that are inseparable, i.e., where movement is not allowed:

7(a) he got over his homesickness
(b) *he got his homesickness over

Third, there are restrictions on particle movement – when the direct object is long as in (8b) below: 8(a) he brought back the book which he borrowed from the library last week
(b) ?he brought the book which he borrowed from the library back last week Consequently, in cases where the phrasal verb is followed by a pronoun, nonnative speakers are usually unable to decide upon the fact that separation is sanctioned as in 9 below, but is not in 10:

9(a) she threw it away
(b) *she threw away it
10(a) she got over it
(b) *she got it over

Arabic Phrasal Verb System versus English Phrasal Verb System

A phrasal verb in Arabic is a matter of a verb and a particle (almost always a preposition) that when occurring together yield a meaning that is often idiomatic. Prepositions that can co-occur with verbs to form phrasal verbs include: min, ?an, bi, fi, li, ma?. I could hardly think of any adverb that can function in this way. Consider the following examples:

Saxir min, DaHika ?ala, 'istahza'?a bi, tanazala la, ta?aglama ma?

One important feature of the Arabic system is relatively speaking simpler than the English system. First of all, only a limited set of frequently used verbs such as be, break, bring, call, come, cut, give, go, have, keep, let, look, make, put, see, set, take, try, work, etc. make up phrasal verbs. Second, a verb that makes up a phrasal verb usually does so by combining mostly with one or two prepositions. A verb like "yaDHaku" is either "yaDHaku min" r "yaDHaku ?ala. Of the English phrasal verbs get out, get over, get round, get round to, get through, get up, and get up to, only one (get over) is encoded in Arabic (yataGhalabu ?ala) as a phrasal verb. Third, in cases where you find the verb combine with

more than one preposition (particle), the meaning of the two phrasal verbs are in many cases are in contrast. Consider:

11(a) raghiba fi (meaning: like to have)
(b) raghiba ?an (meaning: dislike to have; leave)

This is tantamount to saying that most of the meaning, if not all of it, is encoded in the particle. Consequently, Arabic particles tend to have meanings that overrule the meaning of the verb with which it combines. Consider the following examples with ?an:

12(a) a?raTHa ?an (leave)
(b) a?shaHa ?an (avoid looking at)
(c) tanazal ?an (leave)

Fourth, the prepositions with which verbs combine to make up phrasal verbs are not many in Arabic. Those include min, ?an, fi, bi, li, and ma?. Some prepositions such as ?la (lit. to) do not combine with verbs to form phrasal verbs. Another observation I should mention here is that Arabic lexical items corresponding to English particles such as up, over, down, behind, back, through, across, into, and away are all adverbs. So they are used in all cases with their adverbial meaning. You cannot find up, for instance, on one of its occurrences in with a meaning other than "to or toward a higher position" as it is always contrasted with down "to or toward a lower position" (Riddle 1999). Metaphorical extensions like the English examples write up, sign up, wash up, etc. are never found in Arabic. To put it simply, all of these particles behave in Arabic, meaningwise, almost like the English particle back in expressions like be back, answer back, bite back, bring back, call back, draw back, drive back, fight back, fold back, get back, go back, etc., where the particle retains its literal meaning in all combinations.

Fifth, all phrasal verbs in Arabic are transitive. This may be one reason why verbs such as go and come, for instance, do not combine with particles to make up phrasal verbs. On the other hand, they can be followed by prepositions such as to and from. One of the consequences of such a state of affairs is related to the idea of separability. Whereas English transitive phrasal verbs are either separable or in separable, Arabic phrasal verbs are always inseparable. Regardless of its complexity (i.e., pronoun, oneword noun, or more than one-word noun), the object of the phrasal verb—so to speak—it is always in a position next to the particle. As that constituent appear in the objective case, it is in …… in Arabic. Besides, if it is a pronoun, it is attached to the particle to form one unit that is always identifiable in the orthography. In other words, the orthography of Arabic does not allow the pronoun in the …case to be separated from the particle. Consider:

13 (a) ?a.hu (particle +him)
?anha (particle +she)
?anhum (particle +them)
?annaa (particle+us)

The syntactic behavior of the particles in Arabic is more like that of the prepositions. This may explain why a combination like 14(a) below is rarely, if ever, found in Arabic: 14(a) come up with (verb + particle + preposition)

This may add to the difficulty native speakers of Arabic encounter when learning English.

7. Summary

Table 1.1: Below lists the similarities and differences between the phrasal verb system in the two languages

	English	Arabic
Structure	An English phrasal verb is a combination of a verb + a particle	An Arabic phrasal verb is a combination of a verb and a preposition
Verbs combining with particles	Many verbs, especially simple, frequently used verbs such as be, come, go, get, etc.	Very few verbs combine to make up phrasal verbs
Double Function	A combination such as a verb + a preposition can be a phrasal verb on one of its occurrences (e.g. call up a friend, ran across an old friend) and a prepositional verb on a another (e.g. call up the street, ran across the street)	Arabic does not allow combinations that function either way
particles	Many particles are found in English. These include about, across, along, around, at, away, back, by, down, for, in, into, of, off, on, out, over, through, to, up, and with	Arabic has only a limited set of prepositions (and none of the adverbs) that can function as particles: min, ?an, fi, bi, and ma?
Transitivity	Phrasal verbs in English can be transitive and intransitive	Phrasal verbs in Arabic are always intransitive
Separablility	Phrasal verbs in English are either separable or inseparable	Arabic phrasal verbs are always inseparable
Combination with prepositions	English allows the sequence Verb + particle + reposition	Arabic does not allow the sequence Verb + particle +preposition

Pedagogical Consequences
Table (1.1) makes clear that the differences between the two systems overrule the similarities. It is no wonder then that Arab Second language learners of English encounter a great difficulty in acquiring the English phrasal verb system both receptively and productively. When designing an English textbook to be used by Arabs, it should be borne in mind that this is a persistent problem that must be tackled seriously. Unfortunately, because of the difficulty of the subject matter, most textbooks either give little space to the idea of phrasal verbs (e.g. Kirn 1996) or ignore it altogether (Elbaum 1986; Byrd and Benson 1992). In either case, nonnative speakers of the language are not expected to say their prayers before going to bed, hoping that the next day they will get up speaking a different tongue.

Approaches to teaching phrasal verbs

Traditional Approach
The traditional approach, as stated earlier, looks on phrasal verbs as two-word verbs, where the relationship between the first part and the second part is almost random (O'Conell

1987). Students are then introduced to the subject matter via long lists of verbs, each of which combines with many particles, resulting in a different meaning each time the second part changes. A verb like, get, for example, is introduced to students in exercises of the following form:

Phrasal verbmeaning example
get about.   …. ….
get across
 get ahead
 get along
 get into
 get off
 get on
 get on with
 get around
 get away
 get away with
 get back
 get by
 get down
 get down to
 get in

The shortcomings of this approach are many. First of all, this approach is tedious and time-consuming; that is, in addition to killing students' motivation, it requires much mental effort to all those combination one by one. Second, it does not allow students to make generalizations, even ones that need not be verbalized. For "interrelations which would be difficult to explain verbally can be intuitively grasped" (Svalberg 1986: 136). This approach then denies the students the opportunity to see the rationale of the second language system, and thus, wrongly gives learners the impression that the target system is nonsensical. Third, presenting the material in this way implies lack of confidence in the learner. In other words, even students with least aptitude and motivation will not hesitate to ask the most trivial question "Why is this so?" Avoiding any attempts to make generalizations either on the part of the teacher or the learner or even the textbook itself degrades the learner' ability to grasp the rationale of the target language phrasal verb system. In short, this approach to the dilemma kills the learners' motivation and downgrades their aptitude.

New Approach
Recent research has shown that making generalizations as far as the form and meaning of the phrasal verb are concerned is possible. One of the best researchers that tackle the issue from this angle is Side (1990) where he provides plenty of material to show how phrasal verbs are usually formed in English. Textbooks adopting this line of thought introduce phrasal verbs to students along the following lines:

Phrasal verb meaning example
Strain off
Fence off
Take off
Cut off
Warn off
Put off
See off

The advantages of this approach over the traditional approach are many. First, in addition to overcoming most of the problems of the traditional approach, it instills in the learners a positive image towards the target language, and gives them more leisure time to watch their favorite cartoons or play with the other kids after school.

Unfortunately, Side's study is limited to three particles, namely off, out, and up. However, not only other particles are not included in the article, but he also mentions that all these generalization he has come up with do have exceptions. A more comprehensive attempt that also looks at the subject matter from this angle is Lindstromberg (1998). However, although the study is worthy of consideration in second language learning situations as it is comprehensive and detailed, it is to the second language learners disencouraging. This is because of (1) the huge amount of information communicated in the book for each case, and (2) the subtleties that second language learners may not be able to grasp to draw lines of demarcation between seemingly related cases.

An Alternative Approach

The findings that these studies have come up with must always be in the find of the author(s) of textbooks aimed at second language learners. However, overwhelming students with huge amount of information in just very few exercises scattered throughout the text can hardly be successful. What we really need is some kind of guidance for the systematic development of comprehension without the need to explicitly state the rules that underlie the connection between all the verbs that combine with the same particle. I can tell from my personal experience in teaching second language learners of English that finding counterexamples to the already stated rules is no less frustrating than denying the existence of these rules altogether.

One step forward can be taken by presenting phrasal verbs in context. In other words, texts that aim at developing students reading, writing, listening and speaking skills are much more appropriate than grammar books to introduce students to phrasal verbs. Second, it would be more beneficial, I think, to introduce students to this category of words early in their learning the language without the need to overwhelm them explicitly stated rules. In simple terms, we need to trust the mind of the learners in getting the connections by providing as many examples as possible. Third, we may also need to find some space in the curriculum to emphasize the literal and nonliteral (metaphorical) meanings of these particles in other constructions such as when the particle is used as a noun (the ups and downs), as a verb (to up the ante) as an adjective (I feel up) or as an adverb (The hotel is half way up a steep hill). This idea must be stressed because what is literal in one language can be metaphorical in another and vice versa. This may bring about the need to take the native language background into account so as to predict where transfer and interference are likely to occur.

Be that as it may, we need not make the problem of how-to-teach an impediment to what-we-teach. I firmly believe that we need to teach everything regardless whether we have the means to do it or not. For language teaching is always full of pitfalls. We must learn not to ignore them but learn how to live with them.

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