Interlingual Transfer of Idioms by Arab Learners of English

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Introduction

Interlingual transfer (i.e. transfer from the mother tongue or any other previously learned language) in foreign language learning is a major cognitive strategy that learners fall back on when their linguistic means falls short of achieving their communicative ends. Needless to say, the mother tongue is an additional source for hypothesis formation that the first language learner does not have. The influence of the mother tongue and the pervasiveness of interlingual transfer is indisputable, especially in learning situations where students' exposure to the foreign language is confined to a few hours per week of formal classroom instruction, (for more information see e.g. Mahmoud 2000). Thus, interlingual transfer is a strategy that is readily available to the learners to compensate for the inadequacies when attempting to communicate in the foreign language.

Deviations resulting from interlingual transfer have been recorded at all linguistic levels, (see e.g. Gass and Selinker, 1983, 1994; Odlin, 1989). This paper sheds light on the transfer of idiomatic expressions from Arabic into English, an area that has not received much attention so far. Very few studies (e.g. Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989; Mahmoud, 2002) touch on idioms in passing as a part of a review of the difficulties that Arab students face when learning English as a foreign language (EFL). This scarcity of studies on the transfer of idioms could be attributed to the fact that students cannot understand and use idioms unless they attain a fairly advanced level of proficiency in the foreign language. Even then, EFL students' ability to comprehend and produce idioms does not go anywhere near that of a native speaker (see Baker, 1992; James, 1998). EFL learners usually manage to express themselves in plain non-idiomatic language.

An idiom is a group of words which, as a whole, has a different meaning from the meaning of the individual words it contains. Hence, the meaning of the idiomatic expression is not the sum total of the words taken individually. Accordingly, an idiom is learned and used as a single unit of language; it should not be analyzed into its constituent elements. Idioms are sometimes referred to as 'fixed expressions' because in many cases the users should not make linguistic changes such as adding or dropping words, replacing a word with another, or changing the order of words. In some cases, slant lines and brackets are used in dictionaries to indicate alternative words and words that can be left out respectively, (see e.g. Cowie and Mackin, 1975; Seidl and McMordie, 1992; Shalati and Huda, 2000).

Like single lexical items, some idiomatic expressions are common while others are language-specific. Whether common or language-specific, their frequent, spontaneous and appropriate daily use is an indication of native or near-native command of the language. In this respect, Kharma and Hajjaj (1989: 73) say "the foreign learner of English who tries to avoid them â€¦ will immediately single himself out as a foreigner". However, the learner's non-use of idiomatic expressions could be also be due to the lack of knowledge (i.e. ignorance) rather than 'avoidance' which implies knowledge and choice to use or not, (for more information on avoidance see e.g. Hulstijn and Marchena, 1989; Laufer and Eliasson, 1993). Idiomaticity may not be expected of many foreign language learners; their non-use of idioms is attributed to their low level of proficiency in the language. Arabic-speaking learners of EFL are not different in this respect. After ten years of formal classroom instruction, many of them hardly attain an intermediate level of proficiency in EFL. The purpose of this study is to present empirical data verifying the assumption that low proficiency in the foreign language encourages interlingual transfer. Like native speakers of English, Arabic speakers use idioms when communicating in their mother tongue. It is the intention in this study to see whether they transfer those idioms when they write in EFL.

Empirical Data

Relevant data were collected from paragraphs, essays and term papers written by Arabic-speaking second-year university students

majoring in English, (academic years 1995/96 to 2000/01). Students from various batches wrote those paragraphs and essays as weekly assignments in partial fulfillment of the requirements of their reading and writing courses. A total of 124 idioms (excluding phrasal verbs and binomials) were found in 3220 pieces written by 230 students. Out of the 124 idioms detected, 25 (i.e. 20%) were grammatically, lexically and contextually correct. Upon close scrutiny, over two thirds (18 idioms) of these correctly used idioms were found to have Arabic equivalents. They were contextually, formally and semantically equivalent to the corresponding Arabic idioms. The following are examples of correct idioms:

- history repeats itself
- a white lie
- behind his back
- twist his arm
- the black list
- between the lines

The fact that these correctly produced idioms have Arabic equivalents cannot be taken as evidence of positive interlingual transfer. The remaining seven idioms out of the 25 correct idioms had no grammatical and/or lexical Arabic equivalents. Informal discussions with some students revealed that those idioms were either picked up from the teacher in or outside the classroom or deliberately taught or students learned them from dictionaries. Here are some examples :

- raining cats and dogs
- a man of straw
- in line with
- thumb a lift

The remaining 99 (i.e. 80%) idioms were all used in the right context. However, 78 of them contained grammatical or lexical errors and the rest (21) were Arabic-specific. Spelling errors were not considered because Arabic and English are completely different in this respect. These linguistically incorrect idioms could be grouped into the following three main cross-linguistic categories:

(1) Same meaning, different form (66 idioms)

The difference in form ranged from a single grammatical or lexical item to a whole phrase. Most of the grammatical errors were in the areas of articles and prepositions.

[a] Grammatical errors

- the eye by the eye (= an eye for an eye)
- the silence is from gold (= silence is golden)
- from the cover to the cover (= from cover to cover)
- a drop in an ocean (= a drop in the ocean)
- in his face (= to his face)
- in my service (= at my service)
- hand by hand (= hand in hand)
- by any price (= at any price)
- crocodiles' tears (= crocodile tears)

[b] Lexical errors

- gave me the _red_ eye (= evil)
- from time to _another_ (= time)
- a cat has _seven_ lives (= nine)

The errors in this category could be attributed to negative transfer from Arabic. In all cases where the definite article "_the_ " was incorrectly added, Arabic uses the definite article (al). In case of * _a drop in an ocean_ , Arabic uses a zero article to indicate indefiniteness (nuqta fi moheet). The preposition errors are due to translation from Arabic where the preposition (bi) is most cases rendered as "_by_ " and (fi) as "_in_ ". The use of the noun (thahab) in Arabic accounts for the use of the same grammatical class of the

word in English (* *silence is from gold*). In the Arabic equivalent of the English idiom "*crocodile tears* ", both nouns are plural (dumu attamaseeh). The lexical substitution in the above examples could also be attributed to negative interlingual transfer of the Arabic idioms which are identical to the English ones except for one word. A few of the incorrect idioms contained both grammatical and lexical errors reflecting the words and structure of the corresponding Arabic idioms as in :

- took his right by his hand (= took the law into his hands)
- the luck smiled to him (= fortune smiled on him)
- they added the fire wood (= added fuel to the fire)
- the chance of the age (= the chance of a lifetime)

In a number of cases of negative transfer, the error could be attributed to the fact that a completely different form is used in Arabic to express the same meaning of the English idiom as in:

- in the seventh sky (= on cloud nine)
- he was an ostrich (= chicken-hearted)
- drink from the sea (= go and fly a kite)
- as their mothers born them (= in their birthday suits)
- a ring in her finger (= under her thumb)

(2) Same form, different meaning (12 idioms)

There are cases where Arabic and English use similar words and structures to express slightly or completely different meanings. Transfer from Arabic, in this case, leads to formally correct but semantically incorrect use of idioms. The following are examples of idioms that were contextually incorrect. Most of them were related to the parts of the body.

Idiom	Meaning in English	Meaning in Arabic
day after day	every day	every other day
red-faced	embarrassed	furious
pull one's leg	(jokingly) say something untrue	let him talk
stretch one's legs	take a walk	lie down
head over heels	completely (in love)	upside down

(3) Arabic Language-specific Idioms (21 idioms)

As in any language, there are language specific idiomatic expressions in Arabic reflecting the Arab culture and environment. Transfer of such idioms to English may result in comprehension problems if the listener or reader is not familiar with the Arabic language and culture. The following are some Arabic language-specific idioms detected in the written assignments examined:

- he paid *in spite of his nose*
- it was *Osman's shirt*
- clear and *no dust on it*
- tries to *put ash in the eyes*
- as if *birds on their heads*
- we *left the camel with the load*

Conclusion and Implications

This paper sheds light on the interlingual transfer of idiomatic expressions, an issue which has not received much attention. The scarcity of studies in this area is justified since foreign-language students usually express themselves in non-idiomatic language, hence are not expected to use idioms unless they attain a native-like command of the language. Such a high level of proficiency is unlikely to

be attained by most students even after university education in contexts where exposure to EFL is confined to classroom instruction.

This study presents empirical data related to the use of idioms by students in classroom EFL learning situations. The small number of idioms used by 230 university students (only 124 idioms in 3220 written assignments) together with the high frequency negative transfer (80%) are indicative of the problems encountered in learning and using idioms. Baker (1992) attributes the non-use of idioms by Arabic speakers to the influence of written formal Arabic where idioms are avoided. However, idioms are frequently used in non-standard spoken Arabic and some of these idioms are transferred from standard Arabic. The variety of Arabic which EFL learners transfer from is till a point of debate (see Mahmoud, 2000). In addition to the proficiency level in EFL, the students non-use of idioms may be attributed to the teachers' 'avoidance' of idioms in their attempt to facilitate comprehension or their non-use by teachers who are not native speakers of English. Students' exposure to idioms is further reduced due to the fact that the written academic or scientific discourse they read is usually not idiomatic. Thus, university students may encounter the EFL idioms only in discourse used for general purposes such as the passages they read in their language courses in the first two or three semesters. Other sources of idioms include the lists some teachers prepare for their students and books or dictionaries of idioms.

Adults use idioms fluently and frequently in their mother tongue. Therefore they are aware of the importance of idioms in learning and using EFL. They know that the use of idiomatic expressions is a mark of good English. Hence, faced with the problem of low proficiency in EFL on the one hand and the urge to achieve idiomaticity in it on the other hand, university students seem to arrive at a compromise by falling back on the interlingual transfer strategy. The pedagogical implication here is that these adult learners could be made aware of this transfer strategy and its outcome. Cases of positive and negative transfer could be discussed with them so that they know when to transfer and when not to. Needless to say, more exposure to the language through reading and listening is necessary. The language courses should aim at idiomaticity as well as fluency and accuracy. Another step that can be taken in this respect is the compilation of lists of some frequently used English-Arabic idioms divided into the following categories:

- Formally and semantically similar
- Formally similar, semantically different
- Semantically similar, formally different
    - Grammatically different
    - Lexically different
- English-specific
- Arabic-specific

Transfer studies such as this one need to be complemented, if possible, by learners' introspections since the issue of transfer is in the eye of the beholder. Exclusive reliance on correctly or incorrectly produced foreign-language forms and on linguistic similarities between two languages is nowhere near enough to suggest interlingual transfer as an underlying strategy. Further research is needed before any significant use could be made of the findings of this study. Similar studies could be conducted not only with different samples of adult Arab learners of EFL but also with learners of EFL from different first-language backgrounds.

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