Contrastive Syntax Transitivity in Arabic and English

Ala Eddin Sadeq[a], Laith Salman Hassan Hadla[b], [a,b]Department of English Language, Literature and Translation, Zarqa University, Zarqa, Jordan. Email: [a]Alaeddin71@yahoo.com, [b]laith_salman2003@yahoo.com

Arabic and English are two major languages that have numerous similarities and differences in all linguistic domains, especially grammar. A serious issue of great importance in both languages is intransitivity and transitivity. Therefore, the present study contrasts and compares transitivity in both Arabic and English. The first similarity found is that Arabic and English distinguish intransitive and transitive verbs differently. Second, the object in both Arabic and English can be omitted in certain conditions without affecting the type of the verb. Third, sometimes transitive or intransitive verbs require adverbial complements if the meaning is vague. Fourth, there are certain verbs in both languages that must be followed by two objects. Finally, there is an indirect object in both languages. By contrast English is different from Arabic. First, in the latter there exist ditransitive and even tritransitive verbs, whereas in English there are only ditransitive verbs that must include at least one indirect object. Second, unlike English, in Arabic an intransitive verb can be changed into a transitive one using several means. Third, the sentence order in English affects the subject and the object, while in Arabic the order has nothing to do with the case. Fourth, Arabic has a closed set of underivable intransitive verbs that do not exist in English. Fifth, unlike Arabic, the intransitive verbs in English have several subcategories such as ergatives and middles.

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Transitivity in Arabic

Verbs indicate actions, and these actions need agents or doers to fulfil them. Therefore, the verb and the agent are basic elements of the verbal sentence in Arabic. Now if this action was done on something, we call it an object. Verbs in Arabic have three main forms:

1) **Transitive** : المتعدي which take an object or two or even three, without the help of a preposition or anything else that may change the verb from an intransitive into a transitive one, e.g. سَمِعَ ، أعلمَ. The object itself can be realized through one nominal word or infinitival clause as in. أود أن أزورَه.

2) **Intransitive** : اللازم او القاصر which doesn't take object(s) by itself but needs a preposition to take an object such as . أسرفَ ، أنتهى. So, when we say ، أسرفَ الاحمق في ماله the underlined prepositional phrase is, in meaning, not in syntactic terms, an object to the verb أسرفَ. But this meaning isn't fulfilled without an intermediate i.e. preposition.

3) **Sanctioned by common usage** سماعي that is sometimes used as transitive and sometimes as intransitive. For example. شكَرَ ، نصَحَ. A subcategory of intransitive verbs is what is called in Arabic "the underivable intransitive verbs ، الأفعال اللازمة الجامدة, specifically. وحبّذا نِعْم وبِئس. Syntacticians put forward two ways to differentiate transitive and intransitive verbs:

a) To add an enclitic pronoun to the verb, specifically ها which is anaphoric with non-adverbial or root words. If the produced word or phrase is acceptable, then the verb is transitive, otherwise it will be intransitive. For instance, الصحف أخذتها، الغرفة قعدتها. Where the first is acceptable while the other is unacceptable, means the verb قَعَدَ is intransitive.
b) To form a passive participle/passive verbal adjective اسم مفعول need for a preposition, then it is a transitive. Otherwise it will be intransitive. Thus by saying الخبرُ مُعلَن we know that the verb أعلنَ is transitive, whereas by saying العظيمُ مهتوفٌ باسمه we know that the verb must be intransitive, since it was followed by a prepositional phrase in the passive particle form. Nevertheless there are other, more precise criteria to differentiate these two types. Some are semantically governed, such as the verbs that indicate a permanent quality like شَرُفَ فلان whereas others are pattern-governed , i.e. certain patterns go with intransitive verbs only such as the pattern انفَعَل as in. انطلق الرجلُ.

In Arabic a tri-consonantal intransitive verb can be made into a transitive one, by adding letters (morphemes), by germination or by changing the pattern وزن الفعل. These ways are:
1) Adding in the suitable preposition. Semantically the verb becomes transitive but syntactically it remains a prepositional phrase, as illustrated in the underlined, following phrase: خرجتُ من القرية.

Arabs in the past also sometimes omitted the preposition, as in ذهبْتُ الشامَ but we, nowadays, cannot use this freely because it is confined to what Arabs said in the past.

The same verb can take different prepositions to convey different meanings. The preposition إلى in ((يتمطى ثم ذهبَ إلى أهلِه)) conveys transferring from one place to another, but الباء in ولا تعضلوهن لتذهبو ببعض ما أتيتموهن means accompaniment.

The prepositions that function properly as a means for making the verb transitive include:

1) من، عن، إلى، الباء

2) Adding the glottal stop at the beginning of the intransitive tri-consonantal verb. So an intransitive verb as in خفيَ القمرُ can be made transitive as in أخفى السحابُ القمرَ .

3) Doubling the middle consonantal letter:
فرِحَ المنتصر become trans. فرَّحْتُ المنتصرَ.

4) Changing the intransitive tri-consonantal pattern فاعَلَ which conveys the meaning of participation-

جالسْتُ الكاتبَ .... جلسَ الكاتبُ

5) Changing the intransitive tri-consonantal to the pattern استفعل as in استحضرْتُ الغائبَ .

6) Implying another meaning to the intransitive verb as in لا تعزموا السفرَ which means لا تنووا السفرَ where the first verb is intransitive, but as it was it implied the meaning of a transitive verb it became a transitive one. Another example is سمعَ الله لمن حمده in which the transitive verb سَمِعَ took a prepositional complement as it implied the meaning of the intransitive verb استجابَ ..

As we said the verb can take one object, as in عَدْلُ الحاكمِ يكفلُ السعادةَ للمحكومين . It can also take two objects which were originally comment and predicate, as in رأيتُ الظلمَ أقربَ طريقٍ . Further, it can take two objects which were not originally comment and predicate, as in منعتُ النفسَ , or three objects as in علمني العقلُ الاعتدالَ واقياً من البلاء . In any case, a verb cannot take more than three objects. An interesting point to mention here is that sometimes, when we have more than one object, it is very important to have a certain order for them. Sometimes the order must follow the sentence order before it has a verb, e.g. the order of the comment and predicate before they were preceded by the verb. In addition, to avoid ambiguity we have to abide by certain order. For instance, أعطيتُ محموداً زميلاً في السفر . If we change the order of the objects محموداً and زميلاً the meaning will be different. Therefore, we must follow a certain order.

Furthermore, certain verbs usually take more than one object, such as Verbs of Heart (افعال القلوب) or what is commonly known in Arabic as (ظنَّ وأخواتها), and Causative Verbs (أفعال التصيير).

Objects sometimes have no basic meaning or function in the sentence. As a result, they may be omitted. An example from the Holy Quran shows this clearly: ما انزلنا عليك القرأن لتشقى الا)

إلا تذكرة لمن يخشاه. Interpretation for this verse is (تذكرو لمن يخشى). The object may also be omitted for other reasons, such as to be economical as in دعوت البخيلَ للبذلِ فلمْ بقبلْ.

A final remark is that in Arabic one may, or sometimes must, omit the agent of the object. An optional omitting of the agent is ماذا صنعتَ ؟ خيراً. An example of obligatory deletion of the agent is أيها القوم, the omitted verb of which is أنادي.

Some of the prepositions in Arabic may be used as additional ones (زائدة) before objects as in ما رأيتُ من رجلٍ.

Transitivity in English

There are several types of verbs in English. The first is "intransitive", such as the verb "occurred" in "sometimes occurred". The action of the verb is complete in itself. There is no "carrying across". Consider the following example: "Wood floats but iron sinks".

Intransitivity can be further classified syntactically and/or semantically. We will just mention them with examples, without elaboration:

A) Unergative   John <u>laughed.</u>
B) Ergative   John <u>awakened.</u>
C) Middle   John <u>bribes</u> easily.
D) Pseudo-transitive   John <u>wrote</u>.

The seemingly intransitive middles are inherently transitive and thus always have a transitive counterpart. In addition, ergatives are inherently transitive, where the transitive alternate expresses causation. For instance, "John awakened" can be paraphrased "something awakened John".

Intransitives can be followed optionally by adverbials such as "yesterday" or "late" or even by nothing. For instance, "the boy fell" and "the boy fell to the ground", are not followed by ordinary noun phrase (NP) or by adjectives.

The second type is transitive. If the verb can be followed by an (NP) then it is called transitive as the verb ate in "she ate a cookie". Both transitive and intransitive verbs may be followed by adverbials, e.g. "Randy petted the cat gingerly".

However, some intransitive verbs must be followed by adverbials if the sentence is to be grammatical:

We lay <u>there</u>.   *we lay
He lurked <u>outside</u>.   *He lurked
Similarly, some transitive verbs must have adverbials of place following the noun phrase:
He handed the paper <u>to me</u>.   *He handed the paper.
She set the book <u>there</u>.   *She set the book.
These verbs "handed and set" have the feature [+_____ NP place].

Many intransitive verbs can on occasion be followed by a noun that is similar to the verb: "He slept a deep sleep"(they are traditionally called cognate accusative); they don't affect the classification of the verb.

It is possible for a verb to be intransitive in some uses and transitive in others. For instance, "Iron sinks" and "Explosion sinks oil-tankers". The verb "sinks" in the first example is intransitive, and transitive in the other. The classification of a verb depends on its meaning in the sentence under consideration. There is a difference in meaning between "He <u>ran</u> fast", which has the feature [- _____ NP], and "He <u>ran</u> the store" with the feature [+_____NP].

Some verbs with the feature [+_____NP] at times have the indefinite noun phrase deleted:

The student wrote (something).
He shot (something).

But still they have the feature [+_____NP] even when the noun phrase is not present. To ascertain whether a verb is transitive or intransitive, mentally place "what?" or "whom?" after the verb: if the answer to the question can be supplied from the sentence, the verb is transitive. Thus "All the competitors finished the race". Finished what? Answer: the race. Then the verb finish is transitive: it has an object. "All the competitors finished before nightfall". Finished what? No answer is given in this sentence, so "finished" is, here, intransitive.

Another example: "the news cheered him". Cheered whom? Answer-him. The verb cheered is transitive. "The spectators cheered with great enthusiasm". Cheered whom or what? No answer. Intransitive verb.

Some verbs may be followed by two objects: "I asked him the reason", and "Tell me the truth". These sentences can be paraphrased as follows: I asked (from) him the reason, and tell (to) me the truth. Each sentence has two objects: "him" and "the reason" in the first example; "me" and "the truth" in the second example. The object that is preceded by a preposition is called an indirect object, and it usually precedes the direct object, except if the two objects

were pronouns where the direct object precedes the indirect one. These verbs, which take two objects, are commonly called ditransitive verbs.

Contrast

The following differences hold between Arabic and English in terms of transitivity. First, unlike English, in Arabic there exist ditransitive and even tritransitive verbs, whereas in English there is only ditransitive verbs that must include at least one indirect object. Secondly, the terms used by the early Arab grammarians for verb, subject and object are الفعل، الفاعل، المفعول به ; i.e. Action, Actor, and acted upon, respectively, which are obviously semantic terms not to be equated with verb, subject, and object. Thirdly, unlike English, in Arabic an intransitive verb can be changed into a transitive one by several means.

However, English intransitive verbs cannot change their status, except if used in different meanings. Fourth, the sentence order in English affects the subject and object. By contrast, in Arabic the order has nothing to do with the case, because the nominative and the accusative cases are determined by inflections. Fifth, Arabic has a closed set of underivable intransitive verbs that do not exist in English. Sixth, unlike Arabic, the intransitive verbs in English have several subcategories such as ergatives and middles.

On the other hand, both languages have the following similarities with regard to transitivity. First, both languages use different ways to distinguish between transitive and intransitive verbs. Second, the object in both languages can be omitted in certain conditions without affecting the type of the verb. Third, sometimes transitive or intransitive verbs require adverbial complements if the meaning is vague. Fourth, there are certain verbs in both languages that must be followed by two objects. Finally, there is an indirect object in both languages.

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