

## Translating Collocations from English into Arabic and vice versa: An Empirical Study

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### Abstract

*Collocations are defined as "the frequent co-occurrence of lexical items that naturally share the characteristics of semantic and grammatical dependencies"(Ibrahim, 2003: iii). In translation, collocations are considered a factor that makes translation more effective and powerful. However, translating collocations is an everlasting struggle for most students of translation. The present study aims at investigating the challenges that Sudanese EFL university students encounter when rendering English collocations into their Arabic equivalences and vice versa as well as the reasons behind these challenges. To this end, 26 Sudanese EFL students, between 20-30 years old, studying at Nahda College in Sudan, were selected. A diagnostic test composed of two questions is used as a tool for data collection. Frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviation are used to analyse the collected data. The results of this study manifests that Sudanese EFL university students encounter difficulties in translating collocations from English into Arabic and vice versa; the causes of these difficulties are due to students' unawareness of the linguistic and cultural differences between the two languages as well as their heavy reliance on literal translation strategy.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

A collocation is a pair or a group of words that are often used together. These combinations sounds natural to native speakers, but students often have to make a special effort to master them because they are often difficult to guess. In recent years translating collocations has emerged as an important aspect of bilingual translation and it is fast becoming an established unit of description in translation teaching courses and materials. Comparing a text and the human body, Newmark (1988, cited in Ghazala, 2008:106) likens grammar to the skeleton, word to flesh, and collocations are the tendons that connect them to one another. Indeed collocations play a vital role in language. They are its beautiful part, and inject a refreshing spirit in it. They are present and inevitable in any kind of text, with no exceptions. In translation, they are such source of its attraction and unique flavor that makes translation more effective and powerful ( Assaqaf, 2019; Abdi, 2021). Students need to attend to them fully in the target language to lend the translated version the same beauty of the source text. This means that undermining the concerns with the translation of collocations whether in English or Arabic will result in a poor, dispirited target text.

However, it has been noticed that any analysis of students' translation shows a serious lack of collocational competence. Lack of competence in this area forces students into generalizations which in turn leads to mis-collocations. For instance, the adjective 'fat' (رجل/امرأة) collocates both in English and Arabic with the nouns *man/woman/*, (بدین/سمین). Nevertheless, we say only in English: 'fat salary'/fat book', but in Arabic we say (راتب ضخم / کتاب ضخم). However, students of translation may generalize about the meaning of the word 'fat and translate them as (راتب سمین / کتاب سمین). Therefore, this has prompted the researcher to explore this problematic aspect of bilingual translation.

### **1.1.Aims and Scope of the Study**

This study is limited to investigate the difficulties that encounter Sudanese EFL university students in translating collocations from English into Arabic and vice versa as well as the causes of these difficulties. It is confined to the university students majoring in English who are exclusively drawn from 4<sup>th</sup> year students studying a bilingual translation course as a part of their prescribed courses for attaining a bachelor degree in English. The study is conducted in the academic year 2019-2020

### **1.2. Questions of the Study**

This study intends to answer the following questions:

1. What are the difficulties encountered by Sudanese EFL university students in translating collocations from English into Arabic and vice versa?
2. What are the main causes of these difficulties?
3. What are solutions to be adopted in rendering collocations from English into Arabic and vice versa?

### **1.3. Significance of the Study**

The importance of this study stems from the fact that it explores the EFL students' awareness of translating English collocations into their Arabic equivalence and vice versa. It may benefit the students with Arabic background who are pursuing their basic degree in English language. It will equip the students with skills that enable them to develop their knowledge of collocations independently of the teacher. It will also benefit translation teachers who are engaged in teaching bilingual English-Arabic translation courses. Finally the findings of this research will provide syllabus designers' insight on designing translation programs that can address the needs of Sudanese EFL students at the tertiary level.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Definition of Collocation**

A collocation is the habitual co-occurrence of individual lexical items (Crystal, 1981. Printed in Newmark, 1988:212). It is merely considered " the way words combine in a

language to produce natural-sounding speech and writing” as stated in Oxford Collocation Dictionary (2003). Another definition might be “a combination of two or more words that always occur together consistently in different texts and contexts in language.” That is, a certain noun occurs with a certain adjective (e.g. ‘blind confidence’: ثقة عمياء), a verb with a noun (e.g. ‘draw a sword’: يستل سيفاً), a noun with a noun (e.g. ‘brain drain’: هجرة الأدمغة), etc. simply, it is which goes with which in language, namely, which word goes with which word. Many collocations are two words each.

## 2.2.Types of Collocations in English

There are numerous types of collocations in English. However, the concentration here is on the most significant ones only, which are extremely recurrent in language use, and interest students and translators most. The classification of these types according to Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1986) is purely grammatical, depending on the grammatical groupings of word classes according to their occurrence together in the use of language. There are different types of collocations that are manifested as follows:

### 1. Adjectives and Nouns Collocations

smashing victory	إنتصار ساحق
lukewarm reception	إستقبال فاتر
raging storm	عاصفة هوجاء

### 2. Nouns and Nouns Collocations

status quo	الوضع الراهن
essay bank	بنك المعلومات
state university	جامعة حكومية

### 3. Verbs and Nouns Collocations

teach a lesson	يلقن درساً
win confidence	كسب الثقة
exert an effort	يبذل جهداً

### 4. Verbs and Adverbs Collocations

examined thoroughly	درس/فحص بدقة
whispered softly	همس برقة/بلطف
smiled proudly	إبتسم بفخر

### Adverbs and Adjectives Collocations

fully aware of	على علم تام
happily married	متزوج سعيد/بسعادة

### 5. Adjective and Adjective Collocations

healthy and well	بصحة وعافية
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alive and kicking	حي يرزق
right and proper	في احسن حال

#### 6. Adverbs and Adverb Collocations

willy nilly	شاء ام أبي
wholly and heartedly	بكل إخلاص
secretly and publically	سراً وعلانية

#### 7. Prepositional Collocations

##### a. noun and preposition collocations

ignorance of (something)	الجهل ب (شيء ما)
a protest against	إحتجاج على

##### b. preposition and noun collocations

on call/duty (doctor)	طبيب مناوب
to (someone's) advantage	في مصلحة (فلان)

##### c. Adjective and preposition collocations

angry with	اضب من
contrary to	على العكس

##### d. Verb and preposition collocations

burst into tears	اجهش بالبكاء
dream of	يحلم ب

### 2.3. Collocations in Arabic

As a matter of fact, little attention has been paid toward presenting a systematic study of Arabic collocations. It is found in Arabic, under different titles as: التلازم "al-talāzum", التضام "al-tadām" and المتلازمات اللفظية / المصاحبات "al-muṣāhibāt or al-mutalāzimāt al-lafziya". Hassan (1973:217) refers to collocation in Arabic as "al- tadām". He sub-categorizes "التضام" "al-tadām" into two types: التلازم "al-talāzum" (inseparableness) and "التضام" "al-tadām" (mutual incompatibility). He defines the term "al- tadām" as the habitual co-occurrence of two lexical items. The relation that binds between these two lexical items could be rhetorical or grammatical. Whereas Husamaddin (1985:257) defines collocations as: المصاحبة الإعتيادية لكلمة (The normal occurrence of a word with certain other words in a language). He further argues that words do not appear together in a language just by chance and that there are ضوابط المصاحبة *Dawaabit al-muSaaHabah* (collocational restrictions) that govern their usage. These collocational restrictions, according to Husamaddin (1985:258), are:

1. توافقية المصاحبة (*Association agreement*) which means that there has to be an agreement between words that collocate with each other. For example, one could say جبل شاهق (a high mountain), but not رجل شاهق (a high man).

2. *مدى المصاحبة (Collocational range)*: A collocational range is the number of collocates a word can have in order to produce acceptable collocations. The verb مات (to die), for example, has a wide collocational range. It can collocate with many different words. It can be used with the noun إنسان (a human being), حيوان (an animal), and نبات (a plant).
3. *تواترية المصاحبة (Co-occurrence)*: By cooccurrence we mean words that appear together regularly in a language.

#### 2.4. Types of Collocations in Arabic

Hafiz (2002, cited in Brashi, 2005: 44-45) classifies Arabic collocations into twelve different types based on both grammatical and lexical patterns. They are as follows:

1. Verb + noun, whether the noun is subject, object, or state (حال). Examples are: هدأ الموج (the waves subsided), ضرب الخيمة (he pitched the tent), استشاط غضباً (he was inflamed with rage) respectively.
2. Verb + prepositional noun phrase, e.g., إستقال من العمل (he resigned from work)
3. Verb + prepositional noun phrase, where the phrase acts as an adverb, e.g., نفذ بدقة (he precisely implemented)
4. Verb + noun phrase, where the noun is in the form of an adverbial-condition, e.g., اتصل هاتفياً (he made a phone call)
5. Verb + conjunction + verb, e.g., طار وحلق (he flew and soared)
6. Noun + noun (إضافة), e.g., مسرح الاحداث (scene of events)
7. Noun + conjunction + noun, e.g., عزم واصرار (intention and insistence)
8. Noun + adjective, e.g., قوة عظمية (a supreme, mighty or ultimate power)
9. Noun + prepositional noun phrase, e.g., في غاية الادب (extremely polite)
10. Noun + preposition, e.g., مقارنة ب (in comparison with)
11. Adjective + noun, e.g., حسن الاخلاق (having high morals)
12. Adjective + adverbial phrase, e.g., مستنكر بشدة (strongly condemns)

#### 2.5. Translating collocations

Collocations are simply the way certain words habitually occur together. However, these combinations sound natural to native speakers, but language learners have to make a special effort to learn them because they may be often difficult to guess. Some collocations can be transferred from one language into another without any kind of change. On the other hand there are many other types of collocations which differ across languages and cultures. In other words; collocations can be universal or language specific. In English for example, they say “to break the rule/law but in Arabic we say “يخالف القواعد/القانون”. David Crystal (1987: 105) noted that “collocations differ greatly between languages and provide a major difficulty in mastering foreign languages.” For instance, in Arabic the word “نظام” can co-occur with many words like نظام غذائي (diet), نظام مرور (traffic law), نظام عام (public order), نظام شمسي (solar system), نظام عالمي (global system)

(world order), and نظام حكم (regime). The same applies in translating collocations from English into Arabic. For example, Baker (2008:137) noted that the word “deliver” can go with a list of varied nouns, e.g., to deliver a letter (يسلم رسالة), to deliver news (ينقل اخبار), to deliver a verdict (يصدر حكماً), to deliver a baby (يولد امرأة), to deliver a lecture/speech (يلقي محاضرة/خطبة). Therefore, collocations may differ across languages and cultures.

Basically, there are three types of collocations in terms of translatability:

1. In Arabic and English we may find typical compatible collocations which may be translated word-for-word without any loss of semantic or stylistic features, e.g., green light (الضوء الاخضر), blind trust (ثقة عمياء).
2. Semi-compatible collocations where one or more components change across cultures, e.g. مطر غزير (heavy rain), نظام عام (public order).
3. Non-compatible collocations. These are mainly cultural words and as such they are language specific, e.g. “الموودة” (-the female infant that is buried alive), and “افحكّم” (to be ruled by the law of pagan ignorance), which need further commentary or footnotes when being translated. Any attempt to paraphrase such non-compatible or semi-compatible collocations without prior knowledge of the cultural and linguistic properties of both languages may lead to less effective mistranslation.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The main instrument used for data collection is a diagnostic test for EFL students to investigate their awareness when translating English collocations into Arabic and vice versa. The test consists of two parts: The first part consists of 8 English sentences containing collocations to be translated into Arabic. While the second part consists of 8 Arabic sentences containing collocations to be translated into English. The researcher adopts the descriptive analytical method to interpret the data obtained from the above mentioned instrument.

In order to ensure the validity of the test, the instrument was shown to a panel of four university professors. The final form of the instrument was drawn out after taking their comments, opinions and advice into consideration. Cranach’s alpha reliability was computed for the test which revealed that the tool is stable ( $\alpha = 0.868$  and  $\alpha = 0.764$  respectively). This revealed the test is a reliable tool to measure the construct consistently. Frequency, percentages, Mean, and Standard deviation were the statistics which were used to analyse the collected data.

The participants of the current study are 26 randomly-selected Sudanese university students drawn from the English Language Program, at Nahda College, Sudan. They are in their final year of the bachelor degree program in English language. They are about to complete the final semester, semester eight. Arabic is their mother tongue and English is their foreign

language. All the students are exposed to basic knowledge of English as a consolidation to the knowledge already acquired at secondary schools. Along these lines, they are concerned with: Grammar and translation as dictated by bilingual courses (English-Arabic). Lexical relations that exist between words are vitally important for the translation students. It is worth pointing out, that at this level, the participants had acquired some basic knowledge of bilingual translation in their 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> semesters.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Table 1: Participants' scores in translating English collocations into Arabic**

No.	Collocation in English	Equivalence in Arabic	Correct Translation N (%)	Incorrect Translation N (%)
1	key issue	أمر مهم	14 (54%)	12 (46%)
2	economic boom	إزدهار إقتصادي	6 (32%)	20(77%)
3	a sense of pride	شعور بالفخر	16 (62%)	10 (38%)
4	burst into tears	اجهش بالبكاء	11 (42%)	15 (58%)
5	smile proudly	إبتسم بفخر	15 (58%)	11 (42%)
6	fully aware	علي علم تام/ مدرك تماماً	12 (46%)	14 (54%)
7	means and ends	الوسائل والغايات	9 (35%)	17 (65%)
8	secretly and publicly	سراً وعلانية	10 (38%)	16 (62%)
<b>Total</b>			<b>93 (45%)</b>	<b>115 (55%)</b>

Table 1 illustrates students' frequencies and percentages in translating collocations from English into Arabic. Table 1 also shows the total number of participants that got the items correctly which is 91 representing 44% and those who got the items incorrectly are 117 which represents 56%. The rate of the incorrect responses demonstrates that most of the subjects encountered difficulties in translating the given collocations correctly into their equivalences in Arabic.

It is obvious from these frequencies and percentages that the majority of the participants were capable of translating most of the English collocations properly into Arabic. 54% of the participants translated the collocation "key issue" as "أمر مهم" or "مسألة مهمة" which are acceptable translations in Arabic. Although the third collocation, "a sense of pride," and the fifth collocation, "smile proudly," have different grammatical structures in Arabic as (verb+ prep. +noun), the majority of the participants translated them correctly into their Arabic ones. 62% of them translated the collocation "a sense of pride" as "شعور/أحاساس بالفخر," and 58% translated the collocation "smile proudly" as "إبتسم بفخر".



On the contrary, collocations 2, 7, and 8 posed major difficulties for most of the participants. 77% of the students could not translate the collocation “economic boom” properly into Arabic. Most of the students rendered the word “boom” literally into “انفجار” and the translation appeared as “انفجار إقتصادي” instead of “ازدهار إقتصادي”. Another common mistake made by many students was to translate the collocation “means and ends” literally into “يعني وينهي” which makes it sound semantically and grammatically erroneous in Arabic. The last collocation “secretly and publicly” was also proved to be challenging for most students as it has different grammatical structures in both languages. The grammatical structure of the collocation in English is “adverb + adverb” which differs from its structure in Arabic which is “adjective + adjective for “سراً وعلانية” or “preposition + noun + noun” for “في السر والعلن.” Although 38% of the students translated the collocation correctly into Arabic, the most common translation was “سراً وجهاً” which is literal translation.

**Table 2: Participants’ scores in translating Arabic collocations into English**

Item No.	Collocation in Arabic	Equivalence in English	Correct Translation N (%)	Incorrect Translation N (%)
1	هجرة العقول	brain drain	6 (23%)	20 (77%)
2	الايدي العاملة	manpower	3 (12%)	23 (88%)
3	لقن درساً	to teach (someone) a lesson	17 (65%)	9 (35%)
4	إنتصار ساحق	smashing victory	7 (27%)	19 (73%)
5	خيال خصب	rich imagination	5 (19%)	21 (81%)
6	وجبة سريعة/ خفيفة	quick meal	4 (15%)	22 (85%)
7	يخرق القانون	to break the rules	9 (35%)	17 (65%)
8	نظام غذائي	diet	5 (19%)	21 (81%)
<b>Total</b>			<b>56 (27%)</b>	<b>152 (73%)</b>

According to Table (2), the total number of participants who translated the Arabic collocations correctly into their English equivalences is 56 which represents 27%, while the total number of participants who could not translate them correctly is 152 which represents 73%. The rate of the incorrect translations demonstrate that the participants encountered difficulties in rendering Arabic collocations correctly into their English equivalences.

There appeared to be cultural differences between the two languages which caused problems for all the participants in rendering the collocations 1, 2, 7, and 8. Although the collocation "هجرة الادمغة" has a fixed structure in both languages, it was difficult for the participants to distinguish the proper word in Arabic. Most participants translated this



collocation as “brain migration/immigration” instead of “brain drain” which is a direct translation. The second collocation “الأيدي العاملة” was also proved to be difficult for many students to understand and select an appropriate English translation. The majority of students translated the phrase word-for-word into “working hands” instead of “manpower”. They translated the verb “يخرق” in the Arabic collocation “يخرق القانون” into “against” instead of “to break” The majority of students translated the phrase literally into “against the rules/law”. The most appropriate and correct translation should be “to break the rules”. It was difficult for the participants to distinguish the proper words in English for collocation “نظام غذائي” which was translated by many participants as “food system” instead of “diet.” A collocation such as this can be a fixed phrase with a fixed meaning. This is a further example of the mistakes made through direct translation

However, it was not difficult for the students to render the Arabic collocation “لقن درساً” into the correct English one which is “to teach (someone) a lesson for this expression has an identical English collocation. The fourth collocation is “إنتصار ساحق”. Students translated the adjective “ساحق” into “great” rather than “smashing” which is not the equivalent English collocation. Another kind of Arabic collocation which posed a huge challenge for students to render into English was the collocation “خيال خصب”. This collocation can be translated literally into English as “fertile imagination” as in many English-English dictionaries like Cambridge and Collins as well as “rich imagination”. Most of the students failed to provide the correct translation. The difficulty of this kind of collocation lies in the fact that the same adjective in Arabic collocates with a variety of nouns which have nothing in common.

Again, the last Arabic collocation showed how the students who translated it failed to provide an equivalent collocation in English to the Arabic collocation due to their lack of this cultural aspect. The majority of students translated the collocation “وجبة سريعة” as “fast food” instead of “quick meal”. They translated the adjective “سريعة” into “fast” which does not collocate with the word “meal” in English. These percentages reveal that the majority of the study participants lack the cultural knowledge of English collocations and how to use them properly.

#### Variations among students performance:

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Second question	2.4231	26	1.67745	.32898
	Fourth question	1.6923	26	1.31967	.25881

**Table (3): Descriptive analysis of the second-fourth question**

t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
1.817	25	.081

**Table (4): T-test**

Table 6 and Table 7 compare the participants' performance in translating collocations from English into Arabic and vice versa. In the first question, participants were asked to translate a group of collocations from English into Arabic and their average mark was 2.4231 with SD =1.67745 and std. error mean =, at df = 25 and the level of significance as .081. Whereas in the second question they were asked to translate another group of collocations from Arabic into English and their average mark was 1.6923 with sd. =1.31967 at df = 25 and the level of significance as .081. It is obvious from these percentages that the students may have struggled a lot when they had to translate the Arabic collocations into English, and most of them translated the collocations literally without taking into account the fact that translating collocations depends a lot on cultural knowledge, more so than linguistics and semantic knowledge. As a result of this lack of cultural knowledge of English, the students produced strange-sounding translations in English, although they are grammatically correct.

## 5. CONCLUSION

A collocation is a language-specific phenomenon which has certain characteristics that differ from a language to another. However, translating collocations is an everlasting struggle to find the exact TL equivalence. Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that Sudanese EFL undergraduate students encounter difficulties in translating collocations from English into Arabic and vice versa and the possible causes of these difficulties can be attributed to the students' grammatical weakness, lack of vocabulary, and unawareness of the cultural differences between the two languages which led to cultural mismatching of lexical items and in turn resulted in unnatural poor translations in both English and Arabic languages. Another possible cause of these difficulties is that most of the students relied blindly on literal translation strategy between the two languages; hence, they failed to transfer the collocations to their correct equivalences or even suggest close alternatives in the target language.

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