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Syntactic Ambiguity and its Impact on Translation Strategies from English to Arabic

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Abstract

The study addressed Syntactic ambiguity in the translation of ambiguous sentences. A mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods was used to ensure the accuracy of the results. A translation test and group discussion were the data collection tools. The sample consisted of 30 fourth-year students majoring in English at the Faculty of Arts, Department of English Language and Literature. The research revealed that the majority of students relied on grammatical rules and logical expectations when translating the test sentences. The results also showed a clear tendency among students to choose the most common translations and avoid alternative meanings, which they generally considered complex and ambiguous. These findings highlight the urgent need for detailed explanations accompanied by practical application for ambiguous sentences, and for developing students' translation skills.

Introduction

Translation is generally one of the most important means of communication between people and cultures, through the transfer of ideas and knowledge between languages. The process of translation is not simply a matter of replacing words and sentences from one language to another; it requires a deep understanding of the grammatical structure of the sentence, the contextual meaning in which it appears, and precise logical interpretation. Among the challenges that translators face frequently is the ambiguity of grammatical (syntactic) structures.

Syntactic ambiguity often occurs when a single sentence can have multiple grammatical meanings. This type of ambiguity is common in English due to its tendency to change word order within sentences. Phrases can also be joined if there is only one subject. Furthermore, pronouns may refer to more than one word in a sentence, further complicating matters and increasing ambiguity. This can confuse both readers and translators and can lead to inaccurate translation. Translators often find it very difficult to capture the right meaning, especially when translating into the Arabic language.

The relationship between grammar and translation is very intertwined. This is because linguistic directly affect the meaning. A very slight misunderstanding in sentence structure may lead to a completely different interpretation in the target language. Therefore, the translator needs not only a

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large amount of vocabulary but also linguistic competence and analytical skill to handle ambiguity in the source text structures. The difficulty and complexity of translating from English to Arabic are amplified by the fundamental and obvious differences between the two languages. While Arabic tends to avoid ambiguity through inflectional markers, English leaves the interpretation of meaning to its own structure and context. For (EFL) learners in the Libyan context, translating sentences with multiple meanings and syntactic ambiguity is a very difficult task that requires study and evaluation. Students tend to translate words literally within sentences and avoid logically analyzing the grammatical relationships between words within a single sentence. Therefore, they may create an inaccurate translation that fails to deliver the intended meaning of the original text.

Statement of the Problem

This study examines the difficulties and challenges faced by EFL learners when syntactically ambiguous sentences from English into Arabic. Syntactic ambiguity occurs when a single sentence can be interpreted in different ways due to its flexible structure, which can result in more than one possible translation. This phenomenon raises a crucial challenge for learners and translators. Therefore, this research paper investigates the difficulties in translating ambiguous sentences and assesses the extent to which such syntactic ambiguity influences learners' performance when translating them.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the types of syntactic ambiguity that create the greatest difficulties during the translation process.

2. The study aims to investigate the strategies used by EFL learners to convey the intended meaning of syntactic ambiguity when translating from English to Arabic.

Significance of the Study

1. This study may help EFL learners enhance their performance when translating by improving their ability to recognize and capture the intended meaning of ambiguous structures.

2. This research may contribute to the development of teaching strategies and translation tasks in classrooms by highlighting the most common errors and obstacles students encounter when translating ambiguous sentences.

3. The findings of this research can be applied to understand the relationship between syntactic ambiguity and the accuracy of correct sentence translation.

4. This research is considered scientifically valuable because it addresses the topic of syntactic ambiguity in the Libyan educational context, a subject that has not received sufficient study or been fully explored.

Research Questions

This paper seeks the answer to the following questions:

Q1. What are the most challenging types of syntactic ambiguity for fourth-year English majors?

Q2. What strategies do EFL learners use to convey the intended meaning of the source text?

Literature Review

The Concept of Translation

"Translation is the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL). [1] Similarly, Ref [2] defines translation as " Rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text."

According to Ref [2], translation is the skill of conveying a message or idea written in one language into a message or idea written in the target language. The translator focuses on meaning, not vocabulary, because if a translation fails to achieve its communicative purpose, it loses its effectiveness. Since literal meaning weakens translation, while the spirit of meaning enriches it, translation should convey not only the message but also the style of the other language.

Syntactic Ambiguity Types

Syntactic ambiguity is also called grammatical ambiguity. Different structures allow for variations in meaning due to syntactic rules. Ref [3] divided syntactic ambiguity into different types:

The first type of syntactic ambiguity is attachment ambiguity. This type refers to the crucial role that the position of modifiers plays in determining the meaning of a sentence. Here are some examples of situations where attachment ambiguity might occur:

1) prepositional phrase

A prepositional phrase may have more than one verb phrase available to be attached to within the sentence. For example, "The employees will discuss their arrangements for a party at the office." Here, "at the office" could be attached to either the verb phrase "discuss their plan" or the noun phrase " a party."

2) Adverbial attachment

When a sentence contains a subordinate clause, both may have positions for attaching a preposition or an adverbial phrase. For example, "Tom said that Sarah took her dog out yesterday." "Yesterday" could refer to the verb "to say" in the main clause or to the verb "to do" in the subordinate clause.

The second type of ambiguity is gap ambiguity. This occurs when an element can be interpreted in more than one way. For example, "There are the employees that the investigation committee discussed about dismissing. " In this sentence, there are two possible gaps in the relative clause. The first gap suggests that the committee discussed the dismissal with the employees, while the second gap suggests that the committee discussed the employees' dismissal.

The third type of ambiguity is analytical ambiguity. This type occurs when the same element is in doubt and has more than one possible interpretation. For example, "Revolving doors can be dangerous." Here, "revolving" can be either an adjective or a noun.

Previous Related Studies

Several previous studies have been conducted on syntactic ambiguity in translation from English to Arabic. Ref [4] investigated the transfer of meaning in translating ambiguous structures into the Arabic language. The study examined the process of transformational Arabic syntax and morphology. The study examined the theoretical linguistic analysis rather than the learners' practical translation performance.

Similarly, Ref [5] carried out a study to explore the complex relationship between meaning and context, and the role of semantic understanding and polysemy in conveying the intended meaning of a sentence. The results indicated that while syntactic ambiguity may impede the understanding of the

intended meaning, background knowledge and contextual understanding often facilitate comprehension.

Likewise, Ref [6] investigated syntactic and semantic changes in translating into the Arabic language. Although the study explained the shifts in translation, it neglected the students' challenges in translating ambiguous structures and the strategies they applied to resolve ambiguity.

Despite the significant contributions of the mentioned studies, there is still an absence of an empirical study discussing how Libyan EFL learners handle ambiguous structures in translation tasks. Moreover, there are very few studies that have presented the most difficult types of syntactic ambiguity for students or illustrated the strategies they use while translating. Hence, the current study attempts to examine learners' translation strategies when translating from English to Arabic.

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, the researchers used a mixed approach to identify the challenges faced by fourth-year students when translating ambiguous sentences. The mixed approach is an approach that combines qualitative and quantitative research methods. Mixed methods research or mixed research (MM) is defined as "the class of research designs where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts, or language into a single study for breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration." Ref [7] This study used a case study that can help explore the challenges students face while translating English sentences. Cases are limited by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a continuous period. Therefore, this study used two in-depth research tools to collect data: a test for students and a focus group discussion with students.

Participants

Thirty-fourth-year students from the English Department at Faculty of Arts, Al-Mergib University, participated in this study. The researchers selected fourth-year students for this study because they had received training in translation methodology and were required to translate texts. As a result, they all possessed a similar level of proficiency.

Research Instruments

Translation Test

In this study, researchers used a set of ambiguous sentences to collect data. The instrument consisted of eleven sentences that students were asked to translate. The instrument aimed to identify the problems fourth-year students face in translating ambiguous sentences and to suggest appropriate strategies to help them understand the intended meaning.

Focus Group Discussion

To complement the quantitative data, a focus group discussion session was held with the study participants. The session aimed to explore the students' knowledge and attention to translation strategies, as well as their ability to handle ambiguous sentences. The session was designed in line with the key themes identified in previous studies on syntactic ambiguity, consistent with the study's objectives. It included a set of open-ended questions to allow participants to expand on their answers and explain their experiences and translation strategies.

Data Collection Procedures

The researchers adopted a series of study procedures to collect the required data. First, they collected the required data through a translation test consisting of eleven syntactically ambiguous sentences. At the researchers' request, the teacher asked the students to translate these sentences. The resulting sentences were then presented to the researchers. The students were asked to complete this task solely for the study, not to evaluate their performance. Next, the researchers analyzed the data according to the research indicators, which were examined by identifying the types of translations most frequently used by the students. This means that each sentence had two or more translations, depending on the context and the translator's prior knowledge. The aim was to determine the students' understanding of these translations and the range of their usage. Two weeks later, the same participants were interviewed in a focus group discussion session. The break between the test and the discussion session was intended to help students review and identify their mistakes and the procedures they followed when translating the sentences. The session lasted about 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

The term "analysis" refers to the process of presenting and examining the difficulties encountered by the study sample. While the students' answers may show a range of errors, this study focuses specifically on issues of syntactic imbiguity issues. After collecting the study data, the syntactic translation difficulties were identified, and the problems were categorized as described below.

Translation Test Analysis

This part of the research presents an analysis of a translation test administered to the research sample to assess their ability to translate ambiguous English sentences into Arabic. The test included sentences representing various types of grammatical ambiguity, including pronoun ambiguity, relative clause ambiguity, infinitive ambiguity, adverbial ambiguity, verbal noun ambiguity, and phrasal ambiguity. Participants' translations were evaluated to identify the strategies they employed and to examine the impact of ambiguity on their choice of the most accurate translation. The results are displayed according to the order in which the sentences appeared in the translation test. A detailed analysis of all types of ambiguity present in the test sentences, along with participants' responses and interpretations, will be presented in the following subsections:

1. Pronoun Ambiguity

1. Jane told Sally she was late.

The first sentence contains syntactic ambiguity because the pronoun "she" could refer to either Jane or Sally. Therefore, the sentence is open to more than one interpretation. However, all participants interpreted the pronoun as referring to Jane and translated the sentence accordingly as "Jane, who was late." This indicates a strong tendency among participants to associate pronouns with the subject rather than the object.

2. The boss informed the employees that they were dismissed.

This second sentence contains syntactic ambiguity, as the pronoun "they" can be interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation is that the manager informed the employees that they were the ones who lost their jobs; the second interpretation is that the manager informed the employees that another group was being fired. Most participants (27, or 90%) followed the first interpretation, which stated that the employees themselves had been dismissed. However, he remaining participants interpreted "they"

as referring to other people who were dismissed. This discrepancy demonstrates how the use of pronouns can confuse ambiguous sentences for learners of English as a foreign language.

2. Relative Clause

3. The daughter of the mayor who lives abroad arrived yesterday.

The sentence can be interpreted in two different ways. The relative clause "who lived abroad" refers to two different nouns in the sentence. The first interpretation refers to the daughter, and the second refers to the mayor. Most participants (23, or 80%) interpreted the phrase as referring to the daughter and translated the sentence accordingly. In contrast, the remaining participants (7, or 20%) interpreted it as referring to the mayor. This discrepancy suggests that students struggled to identify the referent of the relative clause.

4. The servant of the actress who was famous appeared on TV.

This sentence is grammatically ambiguous. The relative clause "who was famous" could refer to either the servant or the actress. The first interpretation refers to the maid, who was famous in the past, or to the famous actress. The majority of participants (24, 80%) interpreted the actress as being famous, whereas the remaining participants (6, 20%) interpreted the servant as the famous person. This demonstrates the challenge of resolving relative clause attachment in translation.

3. Gerund Ambiguity5.

5. Visiting relatives can be annoying.

The following sentence has two interpretations: In the first interpretation, "visiting" is a participle, meaning that relatives who visit can be annoying. In the second interpretation, "visiting" is a gerund, meaning that the act of visiting relatives itself can be annoying. Most participants (26, or 84%) adopted the second interpretation, while the remaining participants (4, or 16 %) chose the first. The results suggest that the dual grammatical function of the gerund created ambiguity for participants.

6. Flying aeroplanes can be dangerous.

The sentence has two possible interpretations. The word "flying" can serve two different functions, resulting in two possible meanings. The first interpretation is that it is a noun referring to the act of flying an airplane. The second interpretation is that it is an adjective describing airplanes. The majority of participants (27, or 90%) interpreted the sentence as referring to the activity of airplanes flying, while 3 participants (10%) understood it as referring to airplanes in flight. This result highlights the impact of the ambiguity of the gerund on translation choices.

4. Adverbial Attachment

7. The teacher said the candidate cheated yesterday.

The sentence contains a syntactic ambiguity, as the adverb "yesterday" can be connected to two different parts of the sentence. In the first interpretation, "yesterday" modifies the verb "cheated." In this interpretation, the cheating happened yesterday. In the second interpretation, "yesterday" modifies the verb "said," so the sentence means: Yesterday, the teacher said that the student cheated. Most participants (22, 76 %) interpreted the sentence to mean that the cheating happened yesterday. However, 8 participants (24 %) understood it to mean that the teacher made this statement yesterday. This variability reflects the difficulty in defining the range of modifying adverbs.

8. She promised to visit her mum after the meeting ended.

This sentence can be interpreted in two different ways, as the adverbial phrase "after the meeting" can refer to two different parts of the sentence. The first meaning is that she made the promise after the

meeting ended—the meeting ended first, and then she said she would visit her mother. The second meaning is that she will visit her mother after the meeting ends—the promise was made beforehand, and the actual visit will take place then. Most participants (20, 70%) chose the second interpretation, while 10 participants (30%) chose the first. The results reveal uncertainty regarding the modifying adverbial phrase.

5. The Infinitive Ambiguity

9. The chicken is ready to eat.

The phrase "the chicken is ready to eat" has two possible meanings in this context. The first refers to cooked chicken that has been served and is ready to be eaten. The second meaning of "chicken" refers to a live, hungry bird ready to eat something. Therefore, the confusion arises from the infinitive form of the verb "to eat," which can describe the chicken either as the object (that is eaten) or as the subject performing the act of eating. Most participants (27 participants, 90 %) understood the sentence to refer to a cooked chicken ready to be eaten. However, three of the research participants (10 %) translated "chicken" as a living, edible creature. This finding suggests that contextual understanding significantly influenced the students' translations.

6. Prepositional Phrase Ambiguity

10. The professor debated the issue with the students.

The sentence is ambiguous because of the prepositional phrase "with the students," which can be interpreted in two ways and leads to two different meanings. The first interpretation is that the professor discussed the issue with the students. The second meaning is that the professor discussed the students' issue with others. Most participants (25, 86 %) interpreted the sentence to mean that the professor discussed the issue with the students. The remaining participants (5, 14 %) understood it to mean that the issue concerned the students. This result demonstrates the difficulty in identifying implicit sentences.

11. The police arrested the thief with the gun.

This sentence is ambiguous because the prepositional phrase "with a gun" can modify the verb phrase "arrested the thief." The first interpretation is that the police used a gun to arrest the thief, while the second is that the thief was carrying a gun at the time of his arrest. Most participants (19, 60%) interpreted the sentence as meaning that the thief was carrying a gun when he was arrested. The remaining participants (11, 40%) understood it to mean that the police used a gun during the arrest. This result highlights the difficulty participants face in positioning phrases and selecting the intended meaning during translation.

Analysis of Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions were conducted with 30 students to understand the reasons for the diversity of translation choices among participants and to gain a clear and accurate understanding of the difficulties they encountered when translating sentences with ambiguous grammatical structures. The session results influenced the translation test results by presenting participants' insights and interpretations, decision-making processes, and the selection of the optimal translation.

1. Awareness of Ambiguity

Most participants acknowledged that many sentences had more than one meaning. However, some reported initially focusing on the most obvious meaning and using it in their translation. This aligns with

the results of the translation test, where most participants chose a single, dominant interpretation, ignoring other possible meanings.

Strategies for Choosing the Intended Meaning

The participants explained that they relied heavily on grammatical structure and logical meaning when choosing their translations for the test sentences. Many explained that they tried to determine the relationship between sentence elements to arrive at the closest possible meaning by identifying the referent of the pronoun or the word it refers to, or the word to which the descriptive phrase refers. Some also mentioned that they chose the translation that sounded most natural in Arabic. This explains why many students translated sentences like "The chicken is ready to eat" and "The boss informed the employees that they were dismissed" according to their most common and frequently used meanings.

Considering Alternative Explanations

Participants reported choosing the first meaning and translation that came to mind, although most admitted to knowing several possible meanings for the sentences before making their final decision. They justified this by saying that the other translations were less common and less logical than the chosen one. This explains why the less common translation received lower scores on most test items.

Difficulties Participants Faced During Translation

Participants reported several challenges and obstacles while translating the test sentences. These challenges included identifying the referent of the pronoun, determining the positions of relative clauses, and determining the range of adverbial and transitive phrases. Some participants noted difficulty in translating a sentence when they lacked contextual understanding to clarify the intended meaning. To avoid choosing the wrong translation, participants reported rereading the sentence several times, analyzing its grammatical structure, and understanding the possible meanings of its parts before selecting the final translation.

Challenges of Translating Ambiguous Sentences

All participants agreed that the biggest challenge students face in translating ambiguous sentences is recognizing the ambiguity itself. They also emphasized that many students prefer to assume a sentence has only one meaning, ignoring alternative translations. Other challenges included a lack of practice and experience in translating syntactically ambiguous sentences due to limited knowledge in this area, as well as the difficulty of conveying implied meanings into Arabic.

Influence of Teachers and Instruction

Most participants indicated that their teachers played a significant and effective role in shaping their understanding of the linguistic structure of ambiguous sentences. They also acknowledged that classroom explanations, practical translation exercises, and corrective feedback, while limited, helped them better understand syntactic ambiguity. However, some participants noted that translation teaching strategies often focused on identifying a single correct meaning rather than discussing implied meanings. This may have contributed to the preference for dominant interpretations observed in the translation test results.

Although participants possessed a general understanding of syntactic ambiguity, their translations relied heavily on grammatical indicators and their limited prior experience translating test sentences. The discussion session also revealed that students struggled to access and identify alternative meanings, particularly concerning pronouns, relative clauses, and adverbials. The discussion

session's findings strongly corroborate the test results and provide a deeper understanding of the factors influencing students' choice of the appropriate translation.

Discussion

The results of this study are consistent with previous research on syntactic ambiguity in translation. The translation test showed that the majority of participants tend to choose the most common and contextually understood translation rather than considering all possible translations. This finding supports the results of [5], who argued that while syntactic ambiguity can often hinder comprehension, prior knowledge of the language and contextual understanding often help learners determine the intended meaning.

Focus group discussions also revealed that participants relied heavily on grammatical structure, logical interpretation, and contextual understanding when translating test sentences. This finding aligns with [6] study, which confirmed that translation from English to Arabic often involves grammatical and semantic changes to produce an acceptable equivalent text. However, unlike [6] study, the current research specifically identified the difficulties learners encountered in translating ambiguous sentences. Specifically, the ambiguity of the pronoun's referent, the connection of the adverbial phrase, and prepositional phrase ambiguity.

Participants also noted that the lack of contextual clues to clarify meaning significantly impacts the translation of many ambiguous sentences. This study clearly reinforces [4] emphasis on the importance of grammatical analysis in facilitating accurate meaning transfer from English to Arabic. However, unlike [4] study, which focused solely on the theoretical aspects of Arabic grammar, this study provides empirical evidence demonstrating the impact of grammatical issues on translation accuracy.

Conclusion

The results of the translation test and discussion group showed that grammatical ambiguity poses a significant obstacle and challenge for English language learners. Although participants provided acceptable translations, they relied on grammatical indicators and contextual assumptions when translating and interpreting ambiguous structures. They often preferred the most common and obvious translations. The translation test also revealed that participants typically chose the prevailing interpretation, ignoring other alternatives. The discussion group further illustrated this point. Participants admitted that they rarely considered alternative translations and meanings unless specifically asked to do so. The discussion also highlighted the importance of grammatical competence, translation experience, and familiarity with English grammar in the interpreting process. The results indicate that the ability to understand a sentence's multiple meanings remains limited, even though most students have a general awareness of grammatical ambiguity. The study emphasizes the need for translation teachers to encourage students to consider all possible interpretations of a sentence before selecting the most appropriate one, based on their experience, training, the context of the text, and their critical thinking skills.

Recommendations

1.Translation teachers should provide a detailed and comprehensive explanation of grammatical ambiguity and its types, along with practical and effective strategies for resolving it.

2. Translation teachers should encourage students to consider all possible interpretations of a sentence before selecting the most appropriate one, based on their experience, training, the context of the text, and their critical thinking skills.

3. Future research on grammatical ambiguity in diverse educational contexts should be conducted to explore the effectiveness of training programs designed to improve the perception of ambiguity and the translation of ambiguous sentences among English language learners.

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الغموض النحوي وتأثيره على استراتيجيات الترجمة من الإنجليزية إلى العربية

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الكلمات المفتاحية:
الغموض النحوي؛ متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الترجمة من الإنجليزية إلى العربية.

الملخص

تناولت هذه الدراسة الغموض النحوي في ترجمة الجمل المبهمة. ولضمان دقة النتائج، استُخدم منهج بحثي مختلط يجمع بين الأساليب النوعية والكمية. اعتمدت الدراسة على اختبار ترجمة ومناقشة جماعية كأدوات لجمع البيانات. تألفت العينة من 30 طالبًا في السنة الرابعة من تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية في كلية الآداب، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها. كشف البحث أن غالبية الطلاب اعتمدوا على القواعد النحوية والتوقعات المنطقية عند ترجمة جمل الاختبار. كما أظهرت النتائج ميلًا واضحًا لدى الطلاب لاختيار الترجمات الأكثر شيوعًا وتجنب المعاني البديلة، التي اعتبروها عمومًا معقدة وغامضة. تُبرز هذه النتائج الحاجة المُلحة إلى شروحات مُفصلة مصحوبة بتطبيقات عملية للجمل المبهمة، وإلى تطوير مهارات الترجمة لدى الطلاب.