

## ARABIC TRANSLATIONS OF ENGLISH PASSIVE SENTENCES: PROBLEMS AND ACCEPTABILITY JUDGEMENTS<sup>1</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

The passive voice can appear in two types of construction depending on the mention of the agent: agentive and agentless. Arab grammarians have always described the passive in Classical Arabic (henceforth, CA) as an agentless construction. English, unlike CA, has both agentless and agentive passive constructions. The question of when and why each construction is used is beyond the scope of this paper; (see Khalil, 1989).

Very few studies, if any, have dealt with the problems that may be encountered by Arabic-speaking translators of English. This study focuses on the problems of translating English agentive passive sentences. The choice of this particular construction is motivated by the findings of a contrastive analysis of the passive voice in Classical Arabic and English, (Khalil, 1989). We have predicted that Arab translators will have problems in translating English agentive passive sentences since Arabic does not allow the agent to appear in the surface structure of passive sentences. Two options present themselves to the Arab translators when they come across an English agentive passive sentence. They either shift or transpose the English passive sentence into a corresponding Arabic active sentence or translate the sentence word for word<sup>2</sup> into an Arabic passive sentence in which the agent is not suppressed.

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<sup>2</sup> Literal translation of this type is described by Catford (1974:44) as "grammatical transference". He defines it as follows:

S(ource) language items are represented in the T(arget) language by quasi-TL grammatical items deriving their formal and contextual meanings from the systems and structures of the SL, not the TL.

The purpose of this study is threefold: 1) to validate our predictions regarding the problem of Arabic translation of English passive sentences, that is, to find out if Arabic translators transpose the English agentive passive into the Arabic active or use an Arabic passive with an agentive phrase; 2) to elicit Arab experts' acceptability judgments on the Arabic translated sentences; and 3) to check the basis of these judgments, that is, to validate them.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

Two groups of subjects participated in the study: translators and judges. They were selected on the basis of their availability at the time of data collection. The translators were eight Arabic-speaking EFL college instructors and 24 EFL college students. Twelve of the students were graduates of the English Department at Bethlehem University, seven were seniors and five juniors currently enrolled in a translation course as a requirement for a minor in translation.

The experts who evaluated the Arabic translated sentences were 19 instructors of Arabic language and literature at the university level. Twelve specialize in linguistics and seven in literature.

### *Materials*

The translators were asked to translate 25 English agentive passive sentences into Arabic. Nineteen of these sentences had passive verbs with agentive phrases. Fourteen of the passive sentences had animate agents and the rest had inanimate agents. Three types of agentive phrases were used: by+NP, at the hands of+NP, by means of+NP.

The experts completed an Acceptability Judgment Questionnaire which consisted of two parts. Part A elicited biodata about the experts: area of specialization, academic degree and institutional affiliation. Part B included ten Arabic sentences with agentive phrases, nine of which were selected from the translators' responses on the translation task and one was borrowed from Saad (1982). The Appendix lists the ten English sentences, each followed by a transliteration of the translated Arabic active sentence. Each sentence contained one of the following agentive phrases:<sup>3</sup>

- (1) min + NP = by + NP

<sup>3</sup> The following remarks on the transliteration of the Arabic writing system are in order. The apostrophe (') stands for the glottal stop and the symbol (ç) for the voiced pharyngealized (ε). A dot under a consonant indicates that it is pharyngealized (emphatic), a dash under it indicates that it is a long one. When the definite article ('al-) is followed by a noun that begins with one of the "sun letters", the (l) assimilates to a following consonant. These "sun letters" are: t, ð, ð, ð, s, š, z, z, n, r.

- (2) min qibali + NP = by; on the part of + NP  
 (3) min jānibi + NP = by; on the part of + NP  
 (4) çalā 'aydi + NP = at the hands of + NP  
 (5) bi- + NP = by; by means of + NP  
 (6) bi-wasāṭati + NP = by; by means of + NP  
 (7) bi-sababi + NP = because of + NP

The experts were requested to read each sentence, decide if it was "Modern" or "Classical", and then rewrite each sentence judged to be "Modern" in such a way as to make it "Classical". Definitions of the terms "Modern" and "Classical" were given in the Questionnaire. The former describes "Modern Standard Arabic" which is the language of the media and modern literature, whereas the latter describes the language of the Qur'an, the prophetic tradition, and ancient literature.

## FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

### *Arab Translators' Performance on the Translation Task*

The first purpose of the study was to find out whether Arab translators would transpose the English agentive passive sentence into a corresponding Arabic active sentence or would use an Arabic passive sentence with an agentive phrase. Since the two groups of translators who participated in the study differ in their bilingual competence and educational level, we are going to present the findings regarding their performance on the translation task separately. Each translated sentence was classified into one of three types:

- (1) active  
 (2) passive + an agentive phrase  
 (3) other

Then the frequency of occurrence of each type of agentive phrase was counted.

Table 1 presents the frequency (absolute and per cent) of each of the above types of sentences translated by students and instructors.

Table 1. Frequency of each type of sentence translated by students and instructors

	Active	Passive + an agentive phrase	Other
Students	204 (44.7%)	218 (47.8%)	34 (7.5%)
Instructors	073 (48.0%)	065 (42.8%)	14 (9.2%)

As Table 1 shows, both students and instructors have transposed some of the English passive sentences into Arabic active sentences and have translated the others literally into Arabic passive sentences with agentive phrases. However,

the instructors have produced more active sentences (48.0%) than passive ones (42.8%). Moreover, they have made use of the translation procedure of transposition somewhat more often than the students have (48% and 44.7% respectively). This latter discrepancy may be explained by the performance of two of the instructors who have a master's degree in translation. One of them has produced only active sentences and the other has produced four passive sentences and 15 active ones.

The translators' vacillation between transposition and literal translation is not easy to explain. However, two factors may have contributed to this divided usage. First, Modern Standard Arabic – the language of the press, media and modern literary works – tolerates the use of passive sentences with agentive phrases. Second, there exists a misconception that this educated variety of Arabic is not different from Classical Arabic. The question of why some sentences are translated in either of the two ways mentioned above is beyond the scope of this study.

Table 2 summarizes the frequency of occurrence of each of the different agentive phrases used in the Arabic translations of the English sentences.

Table 2. Frequency of the agentive phrases used in the Arabic sentences translated by students and instructors

Agentive phrase	Students	Instructors
(1) min qibali	83 (38.1%)	31 (47.7%)
(2) min	26 (11.9%)	01 (01.5%)
(3) bi	32 (14.7%)	13 (20.0%)
(4) biwasātati	30 (13.8%)	05 (07.7%)
(5) 'alā 'aydi	21 (09.6%)	11 (16.9%)
(6) bisababi	13 (06.0%)	02 (03.0%)
(7) other	13 (06.0%)	02 (03.0%)
Total	218	65

As Table 2 shows, both students and instructors have produced different agentive phrases in their translations of the English passive sentences. A number of factors may have contributed to this result. First, the frequent use of these agentive phrases by the media, the press and modern literary writers may have given these phrases wide currency. Second, there exists a tendency among some "inexperienced" translators to translate word for word. The existence of agentive phrases in some English passive sentences encourages literal translation. Thirdly, Arabic-English dictionaries include these agentive phrases in their entries. For example, Wehr's (1961) dictionary of Modern Written Arabic contains all the agentive phrases mentioned above, together with the English equivalents:

- "min qibali" = on the part of; from; by
- "min jānibihi" = on his part

- "la yadi ('aydi)" = at the hand(s) of
- "biwasitati" = by means of; through; by; on the part of
- "bi" = with; through; by means of (designating instrumentality or agency, also with passive = by)

The inclusion of these phrases, together with the mistaken equation of modern written Arabic with Classical Arabic, may have provided the seal of approval that they are a part of Classical Arabic.

The use of the agentive phrase "min qibali" deserves special attention. We notice that it has the highest percentage of occurrence in the sentences translated by both students and instructors. Besides the factors mentioned above, one more factor may have contributed to this result. The two occurrences in the Holy Qur'an of the phrase "min ladun"<sup>4</sup> (on the part of) in passive sentences may have tempted some to mistakenly believe that "min qibali", by analogy, is acceptable in classical Arabic.

#### Arab experts' acceptability judgments

The second purpose of the study was to elicit Arab experts' acceptability judgements on the Arabic translated sentences. These judgments will be analysed in three different ways. First, the total number of responses on the modern-classical scale will be counted. Second, in case these responses show disagreement among the experts, these responses will be evaluated against Classical Arabic texts. Finally, the consistency of the experts' rewrites will be investigated.

Table 3 presents the responses of the experts on the modern-classical acceptability scale.

Table 3. Arab experts' acceptability judgments on the Classical-Modern scale

Criteria	Sentence No.										Total	%
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Classical	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	8	12	8	30	15.8
Modern	19	17	19	19	19	19	19	11	7	11	160	84.2

<sup>4</sup> The adverbial phrase "min ladun" occurs in the following two passive sentences in the Qur'an:

(a) kitābun 'uḥkimat 'āyātuḥu ṭumma fuṣṣilat min ladun ḥakīmin ḳabīr (Hūd:1) (This is a Book with verses basic and fundamental (of established meaning), further explained in detail, – from One Who is Wise and Well-Acquainted (with all things))

(a) Wa 'innaka latulaqqa 'al-Qur'āna min ladun ḥakīmin 'alīm ('an-naml:6) (As to thee, the Qur'an is bestowed upon thee from the presence of One who is Wise and All-Knowing).

As Table 3 shows, there is total agreement among the experts in their judgments on six sentences. However, the experts are divided in their judgments on sentences number 2, 8, 9, and 10. This is, there is discrepancy in the experts' responses to 40% of the translated sentences. Individual differences by themselves cannot account for this discrepancy since the experts form a homogeneous group in terms of experiential and academic background. The only possible explanation is that some of their responses represent "misjudgments".

Having detected partial disagreement among the experts, the researcher decided to judge the "classicalness" of the translated sentences against Classical Arabic texts. This step would also enable the researcher to evaluate the experts' responses.

### *The Passive in Classical Arabic Texts*

Before discussing the use of the passive with agentive phrases in Classical Arabic texts, a few remarks about the role of linguistic criteria in Arabic linguistics are in order. In their attempt to seek evidence for any linguistic phenomenon, the ancient Arab grammarians depended heavily upon three criteria:

- (1) 'as-samā' = generally accepted usage
- (2) 'al-qiyās = analogy
- (3) 'al-'ijmā' = unanimity

Being the most commonly used linguistic criterion, "'as-samā'" will be used in this study. This refers to generally accepted usage as represented by: (1) 'al-Qur'ān; (2) 'al-Ḥadīth (prophetic tradition); and (3) kalām 'al-'Arab (the speech of the Arabs).

The first type of Classical Arabic texts surveyed was the Qur'an. the researcher identified all the occurrences of the passive in this text. Only two types of agentive phrases were identified: "min+NP" (from/by+NP) and "bi+NP" (by+NP). Of the total number of 957 passive sentences 19 contain the preposition "min" followed by various morphological forms of the noun "rab" (God); All these occurrences share one semantic (informational) unit which refers to the revelation sent down from God. Sixteen of these contain variants of the triconsonantal verb root "n-z-l" meaning "reveal/send". A survey of the occurrences of this verb root in active sentences reveals that almost always the reference is to God, the sender of the revelation. The following two verses represent instances of the passive and active form of the verb root "n-z-l":

yā 'ayyuha 'ar-rasūlu ballig mā 'unzila 'ilayka min rabbika... ('al-mā'ida: 67)  
(Apostle! Proclaim the (Message) which hath been sent to thee from thy Lord.)  
ḍalika bi'anna 'allāha nazzala 'al-kitāba bil-haqqi...  
(al-baqara: 176) (...because God sent down the book in truth)

Since the above two verses contain identical verb root, agent and meaning, we may say that the NP in the prepositional phrase is an agent. It may be concluded that, semantically speaking, the NP in passive sentences with the agentive phrase "min+NP" is an agent. (Saad 1982 assigns the case role "source" to this NP.) The second type of agentive phrase identified in the Qur'an was "bi+NP" (with/by means of). the following two verses are illustrative of the two meanings of "bi", i.e., instrument and reason/cause, respectively:

- (1) fa-'ammā Thamūdu fa-'uhlikū biṭ-ṭāgiya ('al-Hāqqa: 5)  
But the Thamud, they were destroyed by a terrible storm and lightning.)
- (2) ...wa ḥū'inū bi mā qālū... ('al-Mā'ida: 64)  
(and be they accursed for the (blasphemy) they utter...)

In the first verse, Thamud were destroyed by God by means of a terrible storm and lightning. The preposition "bi" indicates the instrument used to carry out the action. This use of the preposition has been called by Arab grammarians "ba' 'al-'isti'āna" (the "bi" of instrument). In the second verse, on the other hand, the Jews were accursed by God for what they had uttered. This use has been called "ba' 'as-sababiyya" (the "bi" of cause).

The second type of CA texts surveyed was "'al-Ḥadīth" (the prophetic tradition). The following dictionary was surveyed: *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane* (Concordance of the Lexicon of the Prophetic Tradition). Only one type of agentive phrase was identified in the passive sentences that occurred in this text, i.e., "bi+NP". The following is an illustrative example:

The prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "nuṣirtu bir-ru'ḥ".  
(I have been helped through fright, meaning God helped me by casting fright into the hearts of the enemy.)

The third type of CA texts surveyed was ancient poetry represented by 'al-mu' 'allagāt 'as-sab' (the seven odes). Similar to the prophetic tradition text, these poems contain passive verbs followed by "bi+NP" only. For example: wa man lam yuṣāni' fī 'umūrin kaṭīatin,

*yudarras bi 'anyābin wa yūṭa' bi mansimī* (Zuhayr:49)  
(He who does not often flatter others will be defeated, humiliated and even killed by them)

The fourth type of CA texts surveyed was ancient proverbs.  
The following anthology was surveyed: *Majma' al-'amṭāl* (a collection of proverbs). Two types of agentive phrases were identified in passive sentences, namely, "min+NP" and "bi+NP":  
(rumiya fulānun min fulānin fir-ra's)  
(X was shunned and badly thought of by Y)  
(qad yudfa'u aš-šaru biš-šari)  
(Evil may be resisted through evil)

It should be noted here that the first proverb is the only one that contains "min+NP".

The fifth type of CA texts surveyed was 'al-Mubarrid's *'al-kāmil*. This literary text contains examples of passive verbs followed by "bi+NP". For example:

(fa ḍuriba bis-siyāṭi + He was beaten with whips.)

The sixth type of CA texts surveyed was *Jamharat xutab 'al-'Arab* (a collection of Arabs' speeches). It contains the agentive phrase "bi+NP". For example:

(...qutila bil-'aṣā wal-ḥajar = He has been killed with a flog and a stone.  
Part 1, p. 156)

The last type of CA texts surveyed was the ancient Arabic dictionaries. Five of these dictionaries contain the prepositional phrase "min qibali". They cite the following active sentences as examples:<sup>5</sup>

'aṣābanī hāḍa 'al-'amru min qibalihi, i.e., min indihī, (*Lisān 'al-'Arab*)  
(This matter has been inflicted upon me from your side, i.e., through you.)  
'aṣābtu hāḍa min qibalik ('*Asās 'al-balāga*)  
(I have gained this from your side, i.e., through your help.)

This nonce occurrence of "min qibali" in an active construction rather than a passive one leads us to exclude it from the types of agentive phrases acceptable in CA. In sum, the above survey of CA texts reveals that only two

<sup>5</sup> Wright (1976) cites examples of Arabic active sentences with the phrase "min qibali". However, the problem with these examples is that their sources are not quoted. Therefore, one wonders whether these examples were made up by Wright or borrowed from Classical text.

types of agentive phrases occur in passive sentences, namely, "min+NP" and "bi+NP".

On the basis of the findings of the above survey, we can evaluate both the "classicalness" of the Arabic translated sentences and the experts' responses on the acceptability judgment scales. As regards the ten translated sentences, we can conclude that only three are "classical", namely, number 3, 9, and 10. Sentence number 3 contains the agentive phrase "min+NP" whereas number 9 and 10 contain "bi+NP". The remaining sentences, on the other hand, are non-classical. As for the experts' responses, some of the experts "misjudged" four sentences, namely, number 2, 8, 9, and 10. Table 4 shows the figures:

Table 4 Sentences misjudged by Arab experts

Criteria	Sentence No.			
	2	8	9	10
-Classical	(2)	(8)	12	8
-Modern	17	11	(7)	(11)

Note: The figures between parentheses represent the number of experts who misjudged the sentences specified.

We notice that sentences number 2 and 8 were misjudged to be classical whereas number 9 and 10 were misjudged to be modern. The figures also show that 28 responses (14.7%) out of the total number of 190 were misjudgments.

#### *The experts' rewrites of the sentences judged to be modern*

As was stated earlier, the experts were asked to rewrite any sentence judged to be modern so as to make it classical. An examination of the types of rewrites made by the experts would shed light on the consistency of rewriting passive sentences with agentive phrases. These rewrites would take one of three forms: active, agentless passive or agentive passive. Table 5 represents the different types of rewrites made by the experts:

Table 5. Classification of experts' rewrites

Sentence No.	Agentive Phrase used	Type of Rewrite		
		Active	Agentless Pass.	Agentive Pass.
(1)	min qibali	4	7	8
(2)	ḡala yadi	7	5	5
(4)	biwasaṭati	14	5	5
(5)	min qibali	7	4	8
(6)	min jañibi	8	4	7
(7)	min qibali	6	5	8
(8)	bisababi	4	6	1
Total:		(50)	(36)	(37)

Table 5 shows variation in the types of rewrites made by the experts. If we examine the types of rewrites for sentences that have the same agentive phrase "min qibali", i.e., 1, 5 and 7, we notice that 17 responses involved a transposition of the agentive passive sentence into the active, 16 into agentless passive and 24 involved changing the agentive phrase "min qibali" to "min". But, this latter result contradicts the results of the experts' responses to sentence number 3 which contains "min + NP". All the experts misjudged this sentence to be "Modern". This inconsistency in some of the judgments on the different experts and in the judgments of the same expert is hard to explain. It might be the case that the experts developed a prejudgment about the "non-classicalness" of the sentences as they realized that these sentences were translations out of English.

### Implications

The results of the present study have implications for both translation instruction and evaluation and the research on Arabic syntax. The problems encountered by the student-translators in the translation of English agentive passive sentences point to the need for placing more emphasis in translation courses on translation procedures such as transposition. Very little attention, if any, has been given to the use of these procedures in overcoming translation problems that arise as a result of the non-equivalency between syntactic structures in the source and target languages. The agenthood in Arabic and English, the focus of the present study, is a clear example. Therefore, the use of translation procedures should form an integral part of translation instruction. Moreover, students should be given ample opportunity to practise applying these procedures whenever they come across problems of non-equivalency. It should also be noted that applying these procedures would free the students from the shackles of unacceptable literal translation, a strategy not infrequently employed by student-translators.

Besides the need for more emphasis on translation procedures in translation courses, students should be trained to do contrastive linguistic projects that involve the target and source languages. These projects would open the students' eyes to linguistic interference problems and thus help them guard against such problems in translation.

The results regarding the discrepancy in the judgments given by Arab experts on translated sentences have implications for the debate over the role of native speaker intuitions as evidence for linguistic phenomena. The fact that the experts were divided on the acceptability of some of the translated sentences may explain the rarity, even the non-existence, of acceptability studies in Arabic linguistic research. It may also explain the Arab gram-

marians' heavy reliance on textual sources of evidence for the explanation of linguistic phenomena.

The survey of the passive in different types of CA texts has yielded interesting observations about the use of the passive in Arabic. These observations have shed some light on the time-honoured claim about the "agentlessness" of the passive construction in Arabic. The result regarding the existence of the semantic function "agent" in such a construction has implications for the debate over the role of semantics in accounting for syntactic phenomena. In this study semantics has been used to explain the existence and acceptability of certain agentive phrases in the Arabic passive at the semantic level.

### Conclusion

The present study has attempted to evaluate Arab students' translations of English agentive passive sentences. A major problem encountered by the students has been the literal translation of the English by-agentive phrase into an Arabic equivalent by-agentive phrase. The Arab translators' tendency to render English agentive passive sentences into corresponding Arabic agentive passive sentences originated under the influence of translation out of European languages which allow passive sentences with expressed agents. Moreover, the frequent use of Arabic agentive passive sentences in the media and modern literature has created the impression that these constructions are acceptable in CA.

The Arab experts' acceptability judgments have revealed partial disagreement on the "classicalness" of the translated sentences. This partial disagreement has motivated the survey of the passive in different types of CA texts. This survey has enabled the researcher to evaluate both the "classicalness" of the translated sentences and the experts' acceptability judgments on the Modern-Classical scales. It has been found that only *three* of the ten translated sentences are Classical. The rest, however, are Modern. Moreover, some of the experts "misjudged" *four* of the sentences. The survey has also revealed that at the semantic level two agentive phrases do occur in passive sentences, i.e., "min + NP" and "bi + NP".

The researcher believes that more research is needed into other translation problems encountered by Arab student-translators. The findings of such research would help translation instructors improve both the quality of translation instruction and evaluation and that of the student-translators' performance. The Arab experts' disagreement on the classicalness of some of the translated sentences is clear evidence that linguistic evaluation is not an easy task. To efficiently teach translation and evaluate the performance of student-translators, instructors should be conversant with Classical Arabic, which should be the target language in translation courses.

## APPENDIX

The ten English sentences, each followed by a transliteration of the Arabic translated sentence.

- (1) John was sent a birthday present by his uncle. (ʿursilat hadiyyatu ʿīdi milādin ʿilā John *min qibali ʿammihī\**)
- (2) A hundred men were killed at the hands of the police. (qutila miʿatu rajulin ʿalā aydi quwwāti ʿaš-šurtatī)
- (3) When I arrived at the airport, I was met by two of my friends. (ʿindamā waṣaltu ʿal-maṭāra ʿamsi ʿustiqbiltu *min sadīgayni lī*)
- (4) The letters will be mailed by the secretary. (satursalu ʿar-rasāʿilu bilbarīdi *biwasāṭati ʿas-sikreterati*)
- (5) This medicine must be prescribed by a doctor. (yajibu ʿan yūṣafa hāda ʿad-dawāʿu *min qibali ṭabībin*)
- (6) A proposal was submitted to the UN by the Lebanese ambassador. (quddima ʿiqtirāhun ʿila ʿal-umami ʿal-muttahidati *min jānibi ʿas-saftīri ʿal-lubnaniyyi*)
- (7) We have been helped by our good neighbors. (quddimat lanā ʿal-musāʿadatu *min qibali jirānina ʿaṭ-ṭayyibūn*)
- (8) The trains to London were delayed by the fog. (ʿīqa wuṣūlu ʿal-qiṭārati ʿal-muttajihatu ilā London *bisababi ʿaḍ-ḍabābi*)
- (9) Thoughts are expressed by means of words. (yuʿabbaru ʿan ʿal-ʿafkārī *bi-l-kalimāti*)
- (10) Two cities were destroyed by the earthquake. (laqad dummirat madīnatāni *bi-z-zilzālī*)

\* Note: Agentive phrases are italicized.

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