The Frequency Taxonomy of Syntactico-Morphological Errors in Persian-English Translation Based on Contrastive Analysis & Error Analysis

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Abstract

This study aims to provide a linguistic taxonomy of frequent errors in Persian to English translation. It also proposes the most frequent and the least frequent errors among EFL students. Translation of Persian to English makes Iranian translators confront the problems such as Orthographic errors, Phonological errors, Lexico-Semantic errors and /or Syntactico-Morphological errors. The main concern of this study would be on the Syntactico-Morphological errors. Error Analysis is a procedure used by both researchers and teachers which involves collecting samples of learner language, identifying the errors in the sample, describing these errors, classifying them according to their nature and causes, and evaluating their seriousness. The researchers conducted a translation project on 500 EFL undergraduate university students in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Translating and English Language and Literature field of studies. Students were asked to translation 30 sentences from Persian to English. After that, the researchers tried to rank and categorize them according to Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis. At the content and context levels, there may be several shared properties between SL and TL equivalents which are connotatively motivated while at the formal level the lexical differences can be problematic. The researchers hypothesize that in errors in use of tenses and in use of articles are the most frequent errors. On the other hand, errors the use of plural morpheme are the least ones. The research is going to help to pinpoint the potential problematic errors and provide some pedagogical guidelines for teachers, syllabus designers and test constructors.

Keywords: Frequency Taxonomy, Syntactico-Morphological Errors, Persian–English Translation, Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis

I. Introduction

In foreign language learning contexts, errors play a very important role both in learning and teaching. But most of the teachers are not aware of this importance. These teachers often have so negative attitudes toward errors, may be they cannot tolerate them and they try to find solution for solving the errors. Many studies have been conducted to emphasize on the significance of errors in teaching and learning processes. It is something natural that all learners make mistakes and commit errors. However, teachers can impede making mistakes by realizing them and operating on them properly. The teachers, syllabus designers, test constructors and so many others can benefit from studies and investigations findings of errors.

The study and analyze of errors has become a filed in Linguistics. There are various approaches to the study of errors. They divided into two major categories: 1. Linguistic Approaches 2. Non-linguistic Approaches. The approaches of Linguistic field are: (a) Contrastive Analysis

Approach, and (b) Error Analysis Approach. Also, the non-linguistic approaches are: (a) Sociological Approach, and (b) Psychological Approach. The main area of this study is Linguistic Approaches so another field will not be discussed.

The aim of this study is to provide a linguistic taxonomy of frequent syntactico-morphological errors in Persian to English translation. It also proposes the most frequent and the least frequent errors among EFL students. Providing this taxonomy enables teachers to may emphasize on some more difficult areas than others. Furthermore, syllabus designers may plan more appropriate and effective materials and finally it is suitable for test developers to construct satisfactory tests. To provide this taxonomy, the researcher has to answer these questions:

  i. What is the most frequent synatctico-morphological error in Persian to English translation?
  ii. What is the least frequent synatctico-morphological error in Persian to English translation?

The researchers hypothesized that, in one hand, error in use of tenses is the most frequent error and on the other hand, error in use of plural morpheme is the least one.

A. Contrastive Analysis & Error Analysis

As it mentioned in Introduction part, the linguistic approach to study errors is dealing with main categories: (a) Contrastive Analysis, and (b) Error Analysis. First, the Contrastive Analysis (C.A) Approach is presented. From the early 1940s to the 1960s, teachers of foreign languages taught that they can solve their students` errors with the use of methods derived from Structural Linguistics. Fries (1972) claimed that "the most effective materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner." Another prominent supporter of this approach Lado (1957) said that the plan of the book rests on the assumption that we can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty, by comparing systematically the language and culture to be learned with the native language and culture of the student. Such these claims which is seems to be a kind of informal observations of learners` systematic errors, it reflects the structure of their native language.  Problems and difficulties of foreign language learners` could be predicted from the differences in structures of two languages. This comparative approach came to be known as Contrastive Analysis (C.A).

Contrastive Analysis derived from two main fields: Behaviorist Psychology and Structural Linguistics. The Behaviorists viewed language same as Skinner (1957) the first language acquisition is viewed essentially as the formation of new habits acquired through repetition and strengthened by the reinforcement of correct responses. Contrastive analysis borrowed principles from the field of the psychology of learning such as imitation, reinforcement, habit strength and positive and negative transfer. According to Keshavarz (2008), Behaviorist psychology along with Structural linguists believed that native language habits which are acquired during childhood as part of maturational process interfere with the acquisition of second language habits which are usually quite different from the habits of the mother tongue. The advocates of these

schools claimed that difficult patterns were predicted on the basis of contrastive analysis, and emphasized in drills.

Contrastive Analysis had so many pedagogical values. After the World War II, C.A became the dominate basis of teaching foreign languages. In that era, error was considered as an evil sign. This negative and dangerous attitude towards errors was reflected in Audio-Lingual Methodology of language teaching in 1960s. In these days, Brooks (1960) declared that like sin error is to be avoided and its influence overcomes, but its presence is to be expected.

Contrastive Analysis became unpopular for several reasons. Firstly, as what is stated in Keshavarz (op cit), empirical studies have failed to substantiate interference as the sole or main cause of errors in second language learning. On the contrary, it has been shown that there are many cases or errors which cannot be attributed to a learner's mother tongue (Wolfe, 1967; Wilkins, 1968; Buteau, 1970). According to Hakuta and Cancino (1977) a more devastating reason was that contrastive analysis fared quite poorly once researchers, instead of relying on anecdotal impressions from the classroom, began collecting data in more systematic ways. Secondly, we cannot always find one-to-one relationship between learning difficulty and the differences between source and the target language.

Because of its obvious shortcomings, Contrastive Analysis only survives in its weak form (Wardhaugh, 1970). As it cannot account for all of the errors, but just for some it gives an incomplete representation of the second language acquisition process.

Error Analysis approach is a more reliable approach to the study of errors, which is directly concerned with student performance. This approach does not limit itself to linguistic interference. According to Error Analysis, many researchers noted that there are similarities between the types of errors in first language acquisition and errors in second language learning. Thus, it is obvious that these errors could not be accounted for in Contrastive Analysis framework. Therefore, investigators hypothesized that the process of second and first language acquisition are essentially the same (Corder, 1967; Dulay & Burt 1972; Richards, 1971).

Keshavarz (2008) mentioned that Error Analysis is a procedure used by both researchers and teachers which involves collecting samples of learner language, identifying the errors in the sample, describing these errors, classifying them according to their nature and causes, and evaluating their seriousness. There are three underlying assumptions which Error Analysis is based on. Firstly, as a language learner, we have to make errors and they are inevitable. Secondly, we can get benefit from errors. Thirdly, the source of all errors is not the learner's mother tongue.

B. Significance of Learners' Errors

Corder (1967) mentioned that errors are fruitful in three respects: to the researcher, to the teacher and to the learner himself. Richards (1971) stated that errors are significant for linguists, for psycholinguists and for teachers.

Chiang (1981) in a study noted other pedagogical implications of Error Analysis: (1). Making use of the hierarchy of difficulty. (2).Making use of the contrastive observations. (3).The usefulness and need of remedial programs. (4).The development of error-based teaching materials and syllabus for use in the composition class. (5).Implication for individualized

instruction. (6).Understanding the strategies for the learner. (7).Implications for teaching methodology.

Xie and Jiang (2007) stated significance of error analysis in language teaching and learning in four aspects: Firstly, by error analysis, teachers will get an overall knowledge about the students' errors. Foreign language learning is a process of hypothesis and trial and error occurrence is inevitable. So the teacher should learn to tolerate some errors, especially some local errors. Secondly, errors can tell the teacher how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and consequently, what remains for him or her to learn. So students' errors are valuable feedbacks. We can do some remedial teaching based on their errors. Thirdly, errors are indispensable to the learners themselves, for we can regard the making of mistakes as a device the learner employs in order to learn. Finally, some errors need to be handled; otherwise, they will become fossilized.

Keshavarz (2008) maintains that an error-based analysis can give reliable results upon which remedial materials can be constructed. In other words, analysis of second language learners' errors can help identify learners' linguistic difficulties and needs at a particular stage of language learning. It is essential for a syllabus to provide with the needs for learning appropriately and errors are important evidence for that. Corder (1973) reminds of de Sassure's words that language is a 'self-contained system', in which each part is systematically related to another part. Ashton (2005) in a study mentioned that although the raw results of CA should not be applied to classroom or syllabus-related decisions, it can provide teachers with useful insights into the linguistic backgrounds of learners and a basis for design of materials, especially those aimed at monolingual classes in EFL teaching situations abroad. Such data do, however, seem unreliable without the "feedback" of the result of a CA motivated EA survey. The finer details uncovered by empirical EA data provide a more accurate base on which to decide a sequencing of materials, the relative degree of emphasis to be put on specific linguistic items, remedial lesson and exercises, and the content of proficiency or achievement tests" (Fisiak, 1981; Richards, 1974).

C. Sources of Errors

In this section, the researchers is only going to review the sources of errors briefly. Richards (1971) cited four major causes of intralingual errors: (a) overgeneralization, (b) ignorance of rule restrictions, (c) incomplete application of rules, and (d) false concepts hypothesized. After that in 1974, he mentioned six sources of errors: 1. interference, 2. overgeneralization, 3. performance errors, 4. markers of transitional competence, 5. strategies of communication and assimilation, and finally 6. teacher-induced errors.

Brown (1980) mentioned four sources of errors: 1. interlingual transfer, 2. intralingual transfer, 3. context of learning[1], and 4. communication strategies. Keshavarz (2008) provided five sources for errors: 1. interlingual errors, 2. interalingual and developmental errors, 3. transfer of training, 4. language – learning strategies, and 5. communication strategies.

D. Other Studies in C.A and E.A

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[1] . Richards (1971: a) called it "false concepts" and also Stenson (1974) called "induced errors".

Numerous studies of different language pairs have been already carried out, particularly on learners of English. Light and Warshawsky (1974) noticed about preliminary error analysis in Russians using English; Guilford (1998) issued a paper named "English learner interlanguage''; and Mohamed et al. (2004) had research on English errors and Chinese learners. Among these studies, commonly observed syntactic error types made by non-native English learners include subject-verb disagreement, noun-number disagreement, and misuse of determiners.

There are many other studies examining interlanguage errors, generally restricted in their scope of investigation to a specific grammatical aspect of English in which the native language of the learners might have an influence. To give some examples, Granger and Tyson (1996) conducted research on connector usage in the English essay writing of native and non-native EFL speakers of English; Vassileva (1998) had an investigation on A contrastive analysis of authorial presence in English, German, French, Russian and Bulgarian; Slabakova (2000) studied the L2 acquisition of telicity marking in English by Spanish and Bulgarian native speakers; Yang and Huang (2004) studied The impact of the absence of grammatical tense in L1 on the acquisition of the tense-aspect system in L2; Franck et al. (2002) and Vigliocco et al. (1996) were both worked on Subject-verb agreement errors in French and English. Faghigh (1997) conducted research on Persian and English definite articles.

II. Methods

To answer the research questions, the researchers designed the methodology as followings:

A. Participants

To find taxonomy for frequent syntactico-morphological errors, initially 509 undergraduate students were accepted to participate in this study. By the time, 9 students were given up and the number of participants decreased to 500 (386 male and 114 female) (N=500). All of the students were Iranian undergraduate students. Although they had the different field of studies, but their major was English. The participants were students of Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Linguistics, English Language and Literature and Translation Studies. All of the participants studied in Mashhad, and they were chosen from different universities and higher education institutes. They had different social backgrounds and their ages were ranging from 19 to 36.

B. Materials

The Persian translation sheet consists of 30 sentences which are derived from different sources. Although there is no absolute agreements on translation of even a sentence, but the researchers chose these sentences from Motarjem Quarterly[2] and supposed it as a reliable source for translation, because of its translators and the quarterly itself. The Persian sentences are from "Runaway", "Moon Palace", "Salomé", "The Remains of the Day" and "A Doll's House". Moreover, the English translations are available in the same source.

C. Procedures

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[2] . Motarjem Quarterly is published by Ferdowsi University of Mashhad.

The sampling method of the study was that of criterion-based selection. In this form of sampling, the researchers created a list of the attributes essential to the study and then seek out participants to match these criteria. Our criteria were: a) EFL student, b) has the experience of passing 4 translation units. In data-collecting procedure, the researchers tried to provide adequate data for this error analysis. The elicited procedure is chosen for this study and translation from native language (Persian) to target language (English) was a main technique. The researchers selected translation because it had so many advantages such as: (1). It forces the subject to attempt to produce the structure under investigation. (2). It assures the researchers that the subject understands the semantics of the structure he is required to produce (Keshavarz, 2008). For these reason written translation was the researchers' choice.

The participants were asked to translate 30 sentences to English. They could use any kind of dictionaries. The allotted time for translation was 90 minutes. For identification and interpretation of errors, because the participants were not available in this stage, the researcher tried to infer as best as possible to reconstruct the intended sentences. After errors have been collected, identified and interpreted, it is a time to classify them according to their frequency, to find out that which syntactico-morphological error is the most and which one is the least frequent one.

III.   **Results and Analysis**

The following table shows the frequency taxonomy of syntactico-morphological errors in Persian to English translation.

TABLE I
The Frequency Taxonomy of Syntactico-Morphological Errors

Error in	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Use of articles	663	27.36 %
Use of prepositions	510	21.05 %
Use of tense	255	10.53 %
wrong use of part of speech	205	8.45 %
Lack of concord	204	8.43 %
wrong use of quantifiers and intensifiers	153	6.31 %
Use of typical Persian constructions in English	102	4.2 %
wrong use of plural morpheme	91	3.76 %
wrong word order	72	2.98 %
Use of relative clause and pronouns	63	2.6 %
Lack of sub-v inversion in wh-questions	57	2.35 %
wrong sequences of tenses	28	1.15 %
misplacement of adverbs	11	0.46 %
wrong use of negative constructions	7	0.28 %
distribution and use of verb groups	2	0.08 %
	2423	100 %

These results show that, error in use of articles (27.36%) is the most frequent syntactico-morphological errors. It is really clear that, most of the undergraduate students of English major in Iran have difficulty with English syntax. In other words, English grammar is one of the problematic areas for student, although lots of hours and course units are allotted to this component of language.

By analyzing the results of this study, we can respond to our first question: *What is the most frequent synatctico-morphological error in Persian to English translation?* As data indicate, error in the use of articles is the most frequent syntactico-morphological error in Persian to English translation of Iranian undergraduate students of English major.

Furthermore, the answer of the second question of this research is become clear: *What is the most frequent synatctico-morphological error in Persian to English translation?* The error in distribution and use of verb groups is the least frequent syantctico-morphological errors.

IV. **Conclusions**

This study aimed to provide a linguistic taxonomy of frequent errors in Persian to English translation. It also proposed the most frequent and the least frequent errors among EFL students. Findings of this study show that, in one hand, the error in use of articles is the most frequent syntactico-morphological errors in Persian to English translation. On the other hand, error in distribution and use of verb groups is the least frequent syantctico-morphological errors.

Conducting such research with this large corpus needs the cooperation of several universities, which in this research persuading some of the universities and higher education institutes was very difficult. Most of the university teachers did not keen on to waste their class time on these projects. The provided Persian sentences were not include all of the syntactio-morphological features, in which some other kinds of errors such as "errors in the use of conditional sentences", "wrong use of negative imperative in indirect speech" and etc. did not include in this frequency taxonomy. For further researches, paying attention to these errors which are connived will be valuable due to so many implications for teachers, syllabus designers and test constructors.

As EFL teachers, we have to be aware about results of error analysis both in theoretical and applied aspects. In order to improve teaching, we need to care the learners' psychological process in language learning, thus teachers have to increase their understanding of learners' errors. Based on the analysis of the causes of their errors, we provide our timely guide and help. By learning error sources and their frequencies, teacher can meet their students' needs. It will be easier for them to deal with their affective, cognitive and other important domains of language learning. Consequently, we can employ more flexible strategies in error correction and make more contributions to the EFL classroom teaching and learning.

These kinds of researches provide reliable results for syllabus designers, to see what items are important or unimportant to include or exclude in their syllabuses. Providing remedial materials based on identifying learners` linguistic difficulties is one of the fruitful aspect of these kinds of researches.

If we believe in the close relationship of testing and teaching in post-method era, so testing should be based on what has been taught and test constructors have to be aware of students` problematic areas and their errors. In my point of view, test developers can use error analysis to

construct distracters, but they do not have to put too much emphasize on problematic areas and errors of learners. This may lead to ignoring affective aspects of language learning.

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