



Problems of Translating English Negative yes/no Questions into Arabic

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Article information

Article history:

Received July 13, 2022
Review September 1, 2022
Accepted September 3, 2022
Available online June 1, 2023

Keywords:

Negative yes-no questions,
Problems,
Translation

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Abstract

This study investigates the problems and difficulties that translation students face when they translate English negative yes/no questions into Arabic. Therefore, a questionnaire of four texts was taken from well-known grammar books and distributed to fifteen M.A. students in the Translation Department, College of Arts, University of Mosul. These texts depict negative yes/no questions with their answers. The participants were asked to translate those questions into Arabic and they are also asked to translate the answers using the words 'na'am' and 'bala.'

It hypothesizes that students sometimes struggle to understand and translate English negative yes/no questions. Therefore, this study aims at examining the student's understanding of how those questions are formed and used, as well as, focusing on the problems that students face when they translate such questions. Most problems come from the lack of structural and functional information about the negative interrogatives in both English and Arabic which is caused by insufficient attention paid to this subject in the language curriculum. In order to assess students' translation of those texts, the study uses Newmark's (1982 & 1988) semantic and communicative method of translation.

DOI: [10.33899/radab.2022.134960.1609](https://doi.org/10.33899/radab.2022.134960.1609), ©Authors, 2023, College of Arts, University of Mosul.
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مُشكلات ترجمة الاسئلة التصديقية المنفية من اللغة الإنكليزية إلى العربية

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المستخلص

يتناول هذا البحث المشاكل والصعوبات التي يواجهها الطلاب عند ترجمة الاسئلة التصديقية المنفية من اللغة الانجليزية الى العربية. ومن أجل معرفة هذه الصعوبات, قامت هذه الدراسة بجمع استبيان لأربع جمل وهي عبارة عن أسئلة مأخوذة من كتب معروفة في قواعد النحو الانجليزي و توزيعها على خمسة عشر طالب من طلاب الماجستير في قسم الترجمة. وقد طلب من المشاركين ترجمة تلك الأسئلة الى اللغة العربية من ضمنها الاجوبة الموضوعه باستخدام كلمتي (نعم) و (بلى). حيث تفترض هذه الدراسة أن الطلاب ليسوا على معرفة كافية بالأسئلة التصديقية المنفية وكيفية ترجمتها الى العربية. وان معظم تلك العقبات سببها عدم الدراية الكافية بالاستفهام المنفي في اللغتين العربية والانجليزية والذي يأتي من عدم الاهتمام الكافي بهذا الموضوع في كتب النحو لكلا اللغتين. لذا فإن الهدف منها هو الى اختبار معرفة الطلاب بهذه التراكيب والتركيز على المشاكل التي تواجههم عند ترجمة مثل هذه الاسئلة. إضافة الى ان هذه الدراسة تستخدم نظرية

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Approaches to Translation (1982) and A Textbook of Translation نيومارك في الترجمة الدلالية والتواصلية في كتابيه (1988).

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستفهام التصديقي المنفي، ترجمة، مشكلات

1. Introduction:

According to Quirk et al (1985), questions are classified into three major classes based on the type of answers they expect. Thus, if they expect affirmation or disaffirmation, they are called yes-no questions, as in: Did you pay your bills? But if they expect information as an answer, they are called wh- questions as in: Where is your car? Whereas, if those questions expect one answer out of two (or more) options presented in the question, then they are called alternative questions as in: Would you like to travel by car or train? (ibid:806).

As a major type, yes/no questions can be put into two forms or orientations. The first form is positive as in: Do you see that? And the second form is negative as in: Don't you see that? (ibid:807-808).

However, the negative form of yes/no questions (including the answers) is still not fully understood by the students of translation. Thus, this negative form is going to be the main concern of this study in addition to the challenges and difficulties that are associated with translating such type of questions from English into Arabic.

1.2 Aims of the Study:

This study aims at the following:

- 1- Explaining what is meant by negative yes/no questions and how they are formed in both English and Arabic.
- 2- Investigating the difficulties and challenges that obstruct the process of translation in dealing with such constructions.
- 3- Assessing the translation of M.A. students taking into account the difficulty of translating and understanding English negative questions due to the big difference between English and Arabic.

1.3 Hypotheses:

1. English negative yes/no questions are structurally different from Arabic negative yes/no questions.
2. The students of translation face difficulties in translating English negative yes/no questions into Arabic.

1.4 Problem of the Study

The students face difficulties in understanding and translating negative yes/no questions from English into Arabic due to the structural differences between English and Arabic.

1.5 Model of the Study

This study adopts a grammatical model of both Quirk et.al (1985) and Al-Samarie (1990) as well as a translational model of Newmark's semantic and communicative method of translation.

1.6 Procedure and Data Collection:

The procedure of this study includes distributing negative yes/no questions taken from different English grammar books such as those of Alexander, Yule, and Gunlogson. The students were asked to translate the questions into Arabic and they were free to follow Newmark's semantic or communicative method of translation whether they are SL oriented or TL oriented.

When it comes to the way of translating the answers of the negative yes/no questions, the students were asked to translate semantically or communicatively and to use the words (na'am) and (bala).

1.7 The Value of the Study:

This study holds benefits for the students of translation. It focuses on the structural problems and difficulties in translation especially those related to understanding and translating English negative yes/no questions. Therefore, this study is important as it finds a way to overcome such problems and improves the quality of translation.

2. Negative Yes/no Questions in English

2.1 The Meaning of negative yes/no Questions

As mentioned before, yes-no questions can be both positive and negative. In the positive form, the speaker is neutral and totally ignorant about the answer. He/she is not biased toward using 'yes' or 'no'. However, using the negative form of yes/no questions indicates that the speaker hopes for a positive answer but new evidence brings a negative one. Therefore, this type of questions is conducive and implies surprise, disbelief, or disappointment (Quirk et. al. 1985:808).

Negative yes/no questions are usually asked to confirm a certain expectation on the part of the speaker, as in:

1. Sarah to John: Didn't Sam tell you that I was coming?

The speaker 'Sarah' asks a negative question because she assumes, initially, that Sam would have told John that she was coming and she wants a confirmation of her question.

2.2 Forming Negative yes/no Questions

Negative yes/no questions are considered as a subtype of the main yes/no question type. It is also considered a minor type of questions under the major yes/no questions. Like the positive form of yes/no questions, negative yes/no questions are formed by placing the verbal element (auxiliary, modal, or copular be) at the beginning of the question, and by using the negation particle.

'not' followed by a subject, the complement, and finally a question mark (Quirk et. al, 1985:810). For examples,

2. Haven't you finished your work?

3. Won't you agree to the conditions?

It is essential to mention that negative questions that contain assertive items (or positive polarity items) such as somebody, someone, already, etc. tend to be biased towards positive orientation which means that the speaker expects a positive answer for his question (Ibid).

Consider the following question,

4. Didn't someone visit last night?

(The implication: I am sure that someone visited last night)

It is important to mention that negative yes/no questions are answered in the same way as the positive yes/no questions which is by using the words 'yes' or 'no'. Thus, if the speaker wants to express affirmation to a negative question he/she uses 'yes', but for disaffirmation the word 'no' is used (Ibid:810-811). For example,

3. Don't you like sweets?

A: Yes, I do

B: No, I do not.

3. Negative Yes-no Questions in Arabic

3.1 The Meaning of Negative Yes-no Questions

Arabic yes-no questions are known as verification questions since they are used in order to ask the a listener to verify the information whether by confirmation (i.e. yes) or disconfirmation (i.e. no). Like English yes-no questions, Arabic verification questions have both positive and negative forms. The positive form is used when the speaker has no planned answer in his mind, whereas the negative form is used when the speaker expects a specific answer in his mind. Thus, it is used to express disappointment, disbelief, or surprise , and also to make the listener acknowledge something (Al-Samaraie,1990:600).

3.2 Forming Negative Verification Questions

Negative verification questions are considered a second form of positive verification questions (or yes/no questions). Therefore, they are formed by using the question particle ‘hamza’ at the beginning of the question followed by a negation particle (la, laysa, lam, lan) then by the word that expresses the missing information, and finally a question mark. Thus, hamza is the only particle that is used in the negative questions, not any other particle. It is important to mention that when hamza is used in the positive question, it is answered by (na’am) to show agreement or confirmation and (la) to show disagreement or disconfirmation to the question.

Whereas, when it is used with negative questions, the answer is (bala) to show confirmation and (na’am) to show disconfirmation (Ibid:606). For example,

7. ألم تقرأ؟ (Haven’t you read?)

Answer: (نعم، لم اقرأ؟) yes, I have. Or (لا، بل، قرأت) No, I haven’t.

3. Data Analysis:

Concerning the grammatical model, this study adopts Quirk’s (1985) as an English model and Al-Samaraie, (1990) as an Arabic model. As for the translation model, the study adopts Newmark's (1982/1988) method of translation, specifically semantic and communicative translation. For the reason that these two methods meet the need of translating the negative questions and suit the process of analyses. However, the main concern in this study is making sure that the students are following the grammatical rules of the target language when they translate the English negative yes/no questions whether they are using the semantic or the communicative method.

The following texts are taken from different grammar books:

SL: Text (1)

“Doesn’t he speak any English?” No, he does not.

(Yule, 2006:46)

TL (Text)

1. ألا يتكلم اللغة الانجليزية؟ لا، لا يتكلم اللغة الانكليزية.
2. هل يتحدث شيئاً من الانجليزية؟ لا، لا يتحدث.
3. أيتكلم بعض الإنجليزية؟ لا.
4. ألا يتكلم القليل من الانجليزية؟ لا، لا يتكلم.
5. ألا يتكلم الانجليزية؟ لا، لا يتكلم.
6. ألا يتكلم الانجليزية؟ لا.
7. أيتكلم شيء من الانجليزية؟ لا، لا يتكلم.
8. ألا يتحدث الانجليزية؟ لا، لا يتحدث.
9. ألا يتحدث القليل من الانجليزية ؟ لا، انه لا يتحدث.
10. ألا يتكلم الانجليزية؟ لا.

11. ألا يتحدث الانجليزية؟ لا، انه لا يفعل.
12. ألا يتكلم الانجليزية؟ لا، لا يتكلم.
13. ألا يتكلم القليل من الانجليزية؟ لا، لا يتكلم اللغة الانجليزية قط.
14. ألا يتكلم الانجليزية؟ لا، انه لا يتكلم.
15. هل يتكلم الانجليزية؟ لا.

Discussion:

The text 'Doesn't he speak any English?' No, he does not.' is a negative yes-no question. It starts with the auxiliary 'does' added to the contracted negation particle 'not'. The text also depicts a negative answer that starts with the negative word 'no' which is used in order to show disaffirmation or disagreement with the content of the question.

When investigating the translation of this question, one can observe that questions (1, 4, 5, 6, 8- 14) are translated correctly for following the target language rules of the negative questions which are using a question particle 'hamza' followed by a negation particle. The translation is also considered as a semantic translation for following the source text meaning and form.

Nevertheless, the translation of questions (2, 3, 7, and 15) is incorrect for neglecting the negation particle and changing the form of the question from being negative into positive which in turn changes the meaning of the question. The reason behind using a positive question is to show total ignorance about the answer, whereas using a negative question shows that the questioner already expects an answer in his mind.

Although the translation of the answers (1-15) may seem semantically correct, however, it is grammatically incorrect translation for using the word 'la' as an equivalence to the English word 'no' to show disagreement. Arabic negative question uses the word 'na'am' to express disagreement or negativity.

SL. Text (2)

"Aren't those books mine?" Yes, they are.

(Yule, 2006:46)

TL (Texts)

1. أليست تلك الكتب ملكي؟ نعم، انها كذلك.
2. أليست هذه الكتب لي؟ نعم، انها كذلك.
3. أ تلك الكتب لي؟ نعم، انها لك.
4. هل تلك الكتب لي؟ نعم، انها لك.
5. أليست هذه الكتب لي؟ نعم، انها لك.
6. أليست هذه الكتب لي؟ نعم، انهم لك.
7. هل هذه الكتب لي؟ نعم، هي لك.
8. أليست تلك الكتب لي؟ نعم، هي لك.
9. أليست هذه كتبي؟ نعم، انها.
10. أليست تلك الكتب لي؟ نعم.
11. أليست هذه الكتب ملكي؟ نعم، انهم كذلك.
12. أ تلك الكتب لي؟ نعم، هي لك.
13. أليست هذه الكتب ملكي؟ بلى، انها كذلك.

14. أليست هذه الكتب لي؟ نعم، انها لك.

15. هل هذه الكتب لي؟ نعم، هي كذلك .

Discussion:

Text (2) ‘Aren’t those books mine? Yes, they are’ is a negative yes/no question that starts with the auxiliary ‘are’ combined with a contracted negation particle ‘not’ and ends with a question mark. The text also contains a positive answer that starts with the word ‘yes’.

In assessing the translations of questions (1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, and 14), it is noticed that the translation is grammatically correct for maintaining the same source structure and following the target language rules of the negative questions by using the question particles ‘hamza and hal’ followed by a negation particle. Additionally, those questions are translated semantically for following the same meaning of the source question.

However, the translation of questions (3, 4, 7, 12, and 15) is incorrect for neglecting the negation particle ‘not’ and changing the orientation of the question from being negative into positive which in turn changes the meaning of the question.

As for translating the second part of the question represented by a positive answer, it can be noticed that translating answers (1-12, 14, and 15) is semantically correct but grammatically incorrect for using ‘na’am’ to show disaffirmation instead of ‘bala’ which is used in the negative questions.

However, the translation of answer (13) is correct grammatically and semantically for delivering the same positive answer and using ‘bala’ to show affirmation following the Arabic grammar rules.

SL. Text (3)

“Isn’t the doctor in?” No, he is not.

(Gunlogson, 2003:21)

TL Texts

1. هل الطبيب في الداخل؟ لا، ليس في الداخل.
2. هل الطبيب موجود؟ لا، انه غير موجود.
3. هل الطبيب موجود؟ لا
4. أليس الطبيب موجود؟ كلا، هو ليس موجود.
5. أليس الطبيب موجودا؟ لا، انه ليس هنا.
6. أليس الطبيب في الداخل؟ كلا، هو ليس كذلك.
7. أيتواجد الدكتور في الداخل؟ كلا، لا يتواجد.
8. أليس الطبيب في الداخل؟ لا، ليس في الداخل.
9. أليس الطبيب في الداخل؟ كلا، ليس كذلك.
10. أليس الطبيب موجود في الداخل؟ لا
11. ألم يدخل الطبيب؟ لا
12. ألا يوجد الطبيب في الداخل؟ لا، ليس في الداخل.
13. أليس الطبيب موجودا؟ كلا، انه ليس موجودا.
14. أليس الطبيب هنا؟ لا، انه ليس هنا.
15. هل الطبيب موجودا؟ كلا

Discussion:

Text (3) 'Isn't the doctor in? No, he is not' is consisted of two parts, the first part is a negative yes/no question that starts with an auxiliary connected with a negative contracted particle 'not'. Whereas, the second part is a negative answer that starts with the word 'no'.

In assessing the translation, one can observe that the translation of questions (4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14) is grammatically correct for following the target language rule of forming the negative questions which is using the question particle 'hamza' followed by a negation particle. Also, the translation of the mentioned questions adopts the semantic method for following the meaning and form of the source text.

However, the translation of questions (1, 2, 3, 7, and 15) is incorrect for changing the questions from being negative to positive which in turn changes the meaning that is proposed by the source text.

Regarding the translation of the second part of the question which is the answer, one can notice that the translation is semantically correct but grammatically incorrect. Semantically, the translators followed the source text meaning and formed the word 'la' as an equivalent to the English word 'no'.

Nevertheless, the word 'la' is grammatically incorrect because Arabic negative questions use the word 'na'am' to show disaffirmation instead of the word 'la'.

SL. Text (4)

"Can't you help me?" Yes, I can.

(Alexander, 1988:220)

TL. Texts

1. ألا تستطيع مساعدتي؟ نعم، أستطيع.
2. هل بإمكانك مساعدتي؟ نعم، بإمكانني.
3. أيمكنك مساعدتي؟ نعم، أستطيع.
4. ألا يمكنك مساعدتي؟ نعم، أستطيع.
5. أتستطيع مساعدتي؟ نعم، أستطيع.
6. ألا تستطيع ان تساعدني؟ نعم، أستطيع.
7. هل بإمكانك مساعدتي؟ نعم، بإمكانني.
8. ألا يمكنك مساعدتي؟ بلى، يمكنني.
9. هل تستطيع مساعدتي؟ نعم، يمكنني.
10. ألا يمكنك مساعدتي؟ نعم، أستطيع.
11. ألن تستطيع مساعدتي؟ نعم، أستطيع.
12. ألا تستطيع مساعدتي؟ لم لا، أستطيع مساعدتك.
13. ألا يمكنك مساعدتي؟ بلى، أستطيع.
14. ألا يمكنك مساعدتي؟ أجل، يمكنني.
15. هل تستطيع مساعدتي؟ نعم، أستطيع.

Discussion:

Text (4) 'Can't you help me? Yes, I can' is consisted of a negative yes/no question which is formed by using the modal 'can' followed by a contracted 'not'. The text also contains a positive answer to the same question by using the word 'yes'.

In assessing the translation of questions (1, 4, 6, 8, 10-14), it is observed that they are semantically correct for following the same meaning of the source text and also grammatically correct for keeping the same source structure of the negative questions by using a question particle followed by a negation particle.

Regarding translation questions (2, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 15), it is noticed that the translators failed in their rendering for not following the same meaning of the source text and neglecting to translate the negation particle 'not' which in turn affects the meaning.

As for the translation of the answers, it is observed that answers (1-7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, and 15) are semantically correct for following the meaning of the source by providing a positive answer to the questions, yet they are considered as a failed translation for not following the Arabic grammar rules that do not use the word 'na'am' as a positive answer in the negative questions. However, the translation of answers (8 and 13) is semantically and grammatically correct for providing a positive answer as the source text and also following the Arabic grammar rules that use the word 'bala' as a positive answer to the negative questions.

4. Conclusion:

The student's lack of knowledge about the structural differences between English and Arabic yes/no questions causes a misunderstanding and mistranslation of those questions. Thus, students used the same grammatical rules of the source language and applied them to the target language. This study concludes that translating negative yes/no questions from English into Arabic is problematic for students of translation. Those problems are caused by the misunderstanding of the English and Arabic negative questions. In addition, some participants did not translate the negation particle in the negative questions and changed the form of the question from being negative into positive which in turn changes the meaning of the question. Furthermore, all participants (except for three students) failed in translating the positive answers of the negative questions and wrongly used the word 'na'am' as an equivalent to the English word 'yes'. Also as for translating the negative answers, no one succeeded in his translation because they used the word 'la' as an equivalent to the English word 'no' which is incorrect when it comes to the Arabic negative questions.

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