

دراسة استقصائية حول أحرف الجر الانجليزية (At و On و In)

ومعانيها في اللغة العربية

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الملخص باللغة العربية :

تُعدّ حروف الجر جزءًا أساسيًا من أي لغة لأنها تساعد في ربط عناصر الجملة وتحديد علاقتها مع بعضها. وللغة الإنجليزية العديد من حروف الجر، مثل: "in" و "on" و "at"، والتي تُستخدم بشكل متكرر في التواصل اليومي. ومع ذلك؛ عندما يتعلق الأمر بترجمة حروف الجر إلى لغة أخرى؛ فقد يكون الأمر صعبًا بعض الشيء لأن اللغات المختلفة قد يكون لها حروف جر مختلفة لنفس السياق. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى استكشاف الترجمات المختلفة لأحرف الجر الثلاثة "in" و "on" و "at" في اللغة العربية، ومعناها المباشر. تم استبعاد المعنى الاصطلاحي لحروف الجر الثلاثة من هذه الدراسة. ضُربت أمثلة للمساعدة في توضيح استخدام حروف الجر هذه وسياق. تكونت عينة الدراسة من مجموعة من الجمل الإنجليزية تحتوي على حروف الجر الثلاثة "in" و "on" و "at". تُرجمت جميع الجمل المستخدمة في الدراسة إلى اللغة العربية للحصول على المعاني المختلفة في اللغة العربية لكل حرف جر. أظهرت النتائج أن حرف الجر "in" له ثلاثة معاني في اللغة العربية، وحرف الجر "on" له خمسة معاني عربية مختلفة، بينما حرف الجر "at" له ثلاثة معاني عربية مختلفة. لذلك؛ قد تكون حروف الجر هذه مضللة عند ترجمتها إلى اللغة العربية. وخلصت الدراسة إلى بعض التوصيات لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية عند تدريس حروف الجر لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** حرف الجر، الترجمة، المكافئ، المعنى، الصعوبات.

An investigation of the three English Prepositions (In, On, At) and their Meanings in Arabic

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Abstract

Prepositions are an essential part of any language as they help connect different elements in a sentence and determine their relationship with each other. The English language has many prepositions, such as “in, on” and “at”, which are used frequently in everyday communication. However, when it comes to translating prepositions into another language, it can be a bit tricky as different languages may have different prepositions for the same context. This paper aims at exploring the different translations of the three prepositions “in, on” and “at” into Arabic, and their direct meaning. Idiomatic meaning of these prepositions were excluded from this study. Examples were provided in order to help illustrate the usage and context of these prepositions. The sample of the study was a collection of English sentences including the three prepositions “*in*, *on*, and *at*”. All the sentences were translated into Arabic to get the different Arabic meaning for each preposition. The findings revealed that the preposition “*in*” had three different Arabic meanings, the preposition “*on*” had five different Arabic meanings, and the preposition “*at*” had three different Arabic meanings. Therefore, these prepositions could be misleading when translated into Arabic. The study has concluded with some recommendations to the teachers of English when teaching prepositions.

Key words: preposition, translation, equivalent, meaning, difficulties.

1. Introduction

Mastering prepositions and applying them precisely can be an arduous task for those learning the English language. Native English speakers who learned English as their primary language during childhood encounter minimal challenges with prepositions. However, for individuals learning English as a second language, grasping prepositions can be exceptionally

challenging. Prepositions are functional words that establish the connection between two other words. They can express relationships in terms of time (e.g. *in 5 minutes*), space (e.g. *on the box*), direction (e.g. *go to the park*), and more. As high-frequency words in English, it is crucial for English language learners to understand and utilize prepositions correctly. Not only do native speakers struggle with understanding and using prepositions correctly, but non-native speakers face even bigger hurdles as they must grasp the complexities of English prepositions, commit them to memory, and apply them accurately.

It is generally acknowledged by the majority of linguistic scholars that prepositions play a critical role in delineating and refining the semantics of various languages. The categorization and application of prepositions tend to vary across different languages, with each exhibiting its own unique attributes and features in handling these linguistic elements.

A preposition, by definition, is a linguistic element that connects a noun or pronoun to another component within a sentence, for example, "*The dog sat under the tree*". Essentially, a preposition denotes the location of an entity in relation to its surroundings. It frequently combines with other elements such as nouns, noun phrases, and pronouns to form phrases. In the English language, prepositions are not solely limited to single words. Apart from brief prepositions containing six or fewer letters, there exists a considerable number of multi-word prepositions.

Similarly, in the Arabic language, prepositions function in much the same way as they do in English - preceding the noun. For instance, "*Around the house*" translates to "*hawla al bait*" (*hawla* = *around*), whereas "*In front of the house*" translates to "*amama al bait*" (*amama* = *in front of*).

In English, certain prepositions consisting of a single word may be represented by two words in the Arabic language. For instance, the term "*among*" is denoted by "*men bayn* بين," which can be translated to "*from between*." Conversely, a singular Arabic word can correspond to a compound preposition in English, such as "*amama* أمام " meaning "*in front of*".

This research focuses on the three fundamental English prepositions - *in*, *on*, and *at* - which are regarded as the most significant among other prepositions in the English language due to their frequent usage. According

to Grubic (2004), the three prepositions are listed in the 9 most frequently used prepositions. These are: *at, from, on, by, in, to, for, of,* and *with*. The scholar aims to explore these prepositions and identify the most plausible Arabic translations for each. The selection of these three prepositions is not solely based on their numerous applications in comparison to other English prepositions, but also because they tend to pose confusion for Arab learners due to inaccurate Arabic translations that adhere to specific meanings, such as the meaning of "on" predominantly being associated with the Arabic term "على - *ala*".

The researchers here aim to pinpoint the similarities and differences between English and Arabic languages. This analysis can greatly assist Arabic learners in surmounting the challenges they encounter while utilizing English in different contexts, thereby enhancing their language proficiency.

In this research, an extensive compilation of examples has been gathered from various sources in order to ascertain and elucidate the potential Arabic interpretations of these prepositions.

2. Research Problem and Limitations

The problem of the use of English prepositions for all learners of English becomes clear for all, and it does not need to be proved and investigated again. Many researches were conducted about these prepositions all over the world and emphasized the presence of the problem. Takahaski (1969) stated that "*the correct usage of prepositions is the greatest problem for learners of English*". Grubic (2004) stated that there are 9 prepositions including "*in, on, and at*" and they are somewhat misleading, because of their multiple meanings and functions. In our community as Arabs, for example, many authors investigated this problem and explored the use of these prepositions (in, on, and at) by Arabic learners and stated that the students encountered difficulties in using these prepositions.

This study does not discuss phrasal verbs or idiomatic expressions including the three English prepositions - *in, on* and *at*. It only focuses on the three prepositions and their multiple direct or literal meaning.

3. Objectives of the Study:

This study aims at achieving the following objectives:

1. Identify the possible Arabic meanings for the three English prepositions, (in, on and at), and knowing the area of similarity between these prepositions in English and Arabic .
2. Explore the use of the three English prepositions, and trying to extract certain rules or strategies for teaching these prepositions.
3. Give some recommendations to the teachers of English which may help them in teaching these prepositions to Arabic learners.
4. Help students use the three English prepositions correctly and avoid using any negative transfer concerning them.

4. Review of Related Literature

A preposition is a word or set of words that is used before a noun, pronoun, or noun phrase to indicate direction, time, place, location, spatial connection, or to introduce an object. Prepositions include, but are not limited to, the words "*in*," "*at*," "*on*," "*of*," and "*to*." They are more than being single words, they extend to appear in different forms and multi words.

Under this heading, literature review, we should give a brief idea about the function of preposition, forms of prepositions as well as presenting some related studies to identify the problem of these prepositions.

4.1 Forms of Prepositions

Most of the prepositions in English are simple, one word prepositions. Some are multi- word prepositions (also called two –word, three-word, or compound prepositions). Simple prepositions are those prepositions which consist of one word such as in, on, at, to, under, by, etc. In the English language we have approximately 70 simple prepositions. About half of them have two syllables (under, over, behind, without) or more (underneath, notwithstanding). Compound prepositions consist of two words such as due to, ahead of, because of, or three words such as in case of, with reference to, in relation to, ...etc. also, compound prepositions can have more than three words such as for the purpose of, from the point of view, ... etc. (Grubic, 2004:12).

4.2. Functions of Prepositions

The function of a preposition is to demonstrate the relationship between two words in a sentence, normally between a noun, verb or adjective and a noun (including proper noun), pronoun, or gerund (verb in noun form). For example:

1. I ran into the classroom.
2. The lady beside Peter is his sister.
3. They spoke to him.
4. He is passionate about swimming.
5. I went to Singapore.

A preposition is normally followed by a noun or pronoun and together they form a "prepositional phrase" (about swimming, into the classroom, beside Peter).

In Arabic, a preposition is known as (*harf aljarr* حرف الجر), and it is made up of a single letter as (*bi* - بـ) or word as (*ala* - على) that links two nouns, a verb and a noun to form a phrase. Prepositions are used before nouns in Arabic, similarly to their use in English, and the word or phrase they introduce is known as the preposition's object.

4.3. Uses of Preposition

Our focus here will be on the uses of the three English prepositions *in*, *on* and *at*, and explain how these prepositions collocate with certain words or nouns.

(i) Prepositions of Time

Dignen et al. (2007:153) define preposition of time as to say or indicate the time when something happens (Cited in Habeb & Ijam, 2022). There are several prepositions that can be used as the preposition of time, they are (*on, in, at, before, after, until/till, for, since, during, from to, and by*). All of the prepositions above cannot be used in the same situation. In other words, each preposition has its own rule which settle when to use it correctly.

The preposition "*in*" is normally used with parts of the day (not specific times), months, years, and seasons. For example,

- He reads in the evening.
- The weather is cold in December.

However, "at" can be used with the time of day or at specific time. For example:

- I go to work at 8:00.
- He eats lunch at noon.

The English preposition "On" is used with days as in the following examples:

- I work on Saturdays.
- He does laundry on Wednesdays. (ibid)

(ii) Prepositions of Place

According to Quirk et al (1985), preposition of place is relating an event or state of affairs to a location or postmodifiers (relating some 'object' to location). In other words, it is used to tell someone where someone else or something. There are some prepositions that can be used to talk about location; they are in, on, at, near, under, between, beside, among, above, and below.

- He is at school.
- Alice was visiting her mother at the hospital.
- Jack was in prison because of murder.
- The cup fell on the floor.
- They will meet in the lunchroom.
- She was waiting at the corner.
- He left his phone on the bed.

(iii) Prepositions of Movement

The use of prepositions to indicate movement is another type of preposition. Prepositions of movement are utilized to convey information about direction or destination of someone or something as described by Dignen et al. (2007:151). Moreover, they note that there are several variations of the preposition of movement, including "to, towards, into, out of, onto, off, across, along, over, through, up, and down." It is noticed that the preposition "on" can be used to express movement (e.g. *I am on the way to college*), while the other two prepositions (*in* and *at*) are not normally used as prepositions of movement.

4.4. Forms of Prepositions in Arabic

According to Saeed, (2014), Arabic prepositions can be classified into two primary classes: true prepositions and semiprepositions.

1. True prepositions: This class contains the structures of language that function only as prepositions. True prepositions can be additionally subdivided into two types based on the number of letters that each preposition includes. Separable prepositions and inseparable prepositions.
2. Semi-prepositions: This type is characterized as being multi-functional and comprising language structures that can function as nouns, adverbs and prepositions.

5. Related Studies

A number of studies were conducted to investigate the problem of learning English prepositions. These studies showed similar results and emphasized the presence of the problem. Here, in this study, we will introduce some of them to give some idea about this problem .

Udhayakumar (2023) discussed the issues that the teachers experience while teaching English prepositions (in, on, at) to English language learners. this study showed that the participants, who were 30 teachers teaching English to college undergraduate students in the Avadi area, taught based on relevant textbooks and were unable to explain prepositions owing to a variety of challenges these challenges were co-existing of many possible prepositional meanings based on the contexts of usage, absence of written guides on using prepositions and native language interference.

Another research investigating the three prepositions was conducted by Al Yaari (2013). It was created to highlight the challenges Saudi EFL students could have while trying to translate the English prepositions at, in, and on into Arabic. This study also aimed to know the difference between the performance of both gender, male and female students, when translating these prepositions. The subject of this study was 50 EFL from Saudi Arabia (25 males & 25 females). They were asked to translate 20 sentences and phrases on English prepositions at, in, and on into Arabic. The findings of study showed that these students faced problems when transferring these prepositions from English into Arabic. The results also revealed that there

was a significant difference in the performance of both types of students, male and female. Female students scored higher marks than male students.

Another study conducted by Yousif and Abdalla (2020) revealed that the majority of Sudanese university EFL students faced problems in using English prepositions. The subject of this study was 50 students studying English at the Faculty of Arts, Al Neelain University. The researcher recommended that mother tongue interference should be taken into consideration. Students' attention should be attracted to the English prepositions and more exercises should be delivered when teaching prepositions.

6. Research Design and Methodology

The researchers here used a qualitative approach by employing analysis for a number of sentences from different sources of English. They form the sample of the study. The sentences were selected with a criterion of containing one of the three prepositions, *in*, *on*, and *at*. However, the sentences under study only discuss the prepositions that have direct meaning, not idiomatic, i.e. sentences with idiomatic meaning or expressions are excluded from the sample of this study. Then, these sentences, including the three prepositions, were translated into Arabic. The translation of these sentences were followed by analysis and discussion. The Arabic translation was revised by specialists in Arabic language.

7. Analysis and Discussion

The translation of the sentences including three English prepositions showed that these prepositions have more than one meaning in Arabic language. Each of them has multiple meanings and can be used in various contexts. The meanings of these prepositions often depends on the context in which they are used. For instance, the preposition (*in*) can be used to indicate location and time. When used to indicate location, it is being inside or within a particular area or boundary. It can also indicate a situation or condition, as in the expression (in trouble, في ورطة) or (in love, في الغرام). When used to indicate time, (*in*) can indicate a duration or time period, such as (in two days, في يومين) or (in the morning, في الصباح). Translating the preposition (*in*) in the collected sentences revealed that it had three different Arabic meanings which are (*fi* – في, *bi* – بـ, and *ala* – على).

Similarly, the preposition (*on*) can also have multiple meanings. It can indicate a surface or position, as in (on the table, على الطاولة) or (on the floor, على الأرض). It can also indicate a state or condition, as in (on vacation, في إجازة). Additionally, (*on*) can indicate a time or date, as in (on Monday, في يوم الاثنين) or (on the weekend, في نهاية الأسبوع). In general, after investigating and translating the sentences that included the preposition (*on*), we found that this preposition had five different Arabic meanings. These meanings are: *ala* على, *fi* في, *hawla* حول, *bi* بـ and *a'n* عن ; and each Arabic meaning depends on the context that is used in.

The third preposition (*at*) can indicate a location or a specific point in time. It is used to indicate location, or being in a particular place, such as (at the office, بالمكتب/في المكتب) or (at the park, في المنتزه). When it is used for time, (*at*) refers to a specific point in time, such as (at noon, عند الظهر) or (at midnight, في منتصف الليل). In brief, it can be said that the English preposition (*at*) had three different Arabic meanings, *fi* في, *inda* عند, and *bi* بـ.

The results show that although Arabic and English do not have exact matches for many prepositions, there are often similarities that can be helpful when translating. For instance (*in*), can be used as “في *fi*” in certain situations such as when using with time. The preposition (*on*) can be translated and taught as “في *fi*” when it is used, for example, with the days of the week. The preposition (*at*) can be considered as having the Arabic meaning “عند *inda*” when it is used to express certain point in time, (e.g. at 8:00 o'clock عند الساعة الثامنة, at noon عند الظهر).

The following table explains how each of the three prepositions have more than one meaning in Arabic. The table below includes all the possible Arabic meanings for each preposition. i.e. the preposition (*in*) has three arabic meanings, the second preposition (*on*) has five different Arabic meanings, while the third preposition (*at*) has three different Arabic meanings.

Table 1: The Possible Arabic Meanings for the Three English Prepositions

<i>English preposition</i>	<i>Arabic equivalent</i>
In	في (fi) ، بي (bi) ، على (ala)
<i>English preposition</i>	<i>Arabic equivalent</i>
On	على (ala) ، في (fi) حول (hawla) ، بي (bi) ، عن (a'n)
At	في (fi) ، عند (inda) ، بي (bi)

However, in certain situations, the English preposition does not have direct equivalent preposition in Arabic. It is implicitly understood from the context or from another part of the sentence. The following table (Table 2) presents some examples about the omission of certain prepositions.

Table 2: Examples of Omission of English Preposition in Arabic

<i>English Sentence</i>	<i>Arabic Translation</i>
Ms O'Neill isn't available at present.	السيدة أونيل غير موجودة حالياً.
The boat is ten metres in length.	يبلغ طول القارب عشرة أمتار.
He is leaving on Saturday .	سيغادر يوم السبت.

Due to structural differences, Arabic sentences may be structured differently from their English counterparts, which might affect the placement and usage of prepositions. For example, while English often uses "in" to indicate a location, Arabic may use either (*في* fi) or (*على* ala), depending on the specifics.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has investigated the three prepositions “*in*”, “*on*” and “*at*” for the sake of getting the Arabic meaning which may help in learning these prepositions. After translating these prepositions, it was found that each one had a few number of Arabic meanings. For the preposition “*in*”, it had three Arabic meanings. The second one, “*on*” had five meanings, while the third preposition, “*at*” had three Arabic meanings. It can be concluded that there is no one meaning for each of the three prepositions (*in*), (*on*) and (*at*), either as prepositions of place or prepositions of time. Moreover, the meanings of these prepositions sometimes are interrelated when translated into Arabic. The meaning of these prepositions depend too much on the context in which they occur. In learning and translating alike, these prepositions have no one to one

meaning. Therefore, in teaching English prepositions, teachers should avoid literal translation due to irregularity of meanings in Arabic. The investigation revealed that some English prepositions, in certain situations, do not have direct equivalent meaning in Arabic language.

Since the prepositions have different meanings depending on the context they are used in, the details surrounding a preposition's use should be considered as well as the relationship between the words in order to select the most appropriate Arabic preposition.

Students should know that these prepositions, *in* and *on*, and some others are optional when used before some phrases referring to time. For example, *in* and *on* in the following phrases are optional and can be omitted. (*In*) *the January before last*, (*on*) *the day before yesterday*. Another optional case for the prepositions, *in*, *on* and *at*, should be taught and explained when they are used with phrases identifying a time before or after a given time in the past or future. Students can be provided with examples such as (*in*) *the previous spring*, (*at*) *the following weekend*, (*on*) *the next day*.

Regarding the usage, as with any language skill, practice is essential to improving the ability to deal with prepositions. Engaging the students regularly with both English and Arabic texts is very helpful to be familiarized with different ways that each language handles its prepositions.

After covering the basics, using these prepositions in various contexts should be practised, to help recognize key differences between English and Arabic sentence structures. Exercises should be organized aiming at having ample opportunities for the students to enhance their skills. The teacher should give feedback and adjustments where necessary to promote accurate understanding of how to properly use and translate these English prepositions into Arabic.

Students' attention should be attracted to the use of the preposition at the end of the English sentence. They should know that prepositions sometimes are not necessary at the end of the sentence. For instance, the preposition "*at*" in the following sentence is unnecessary and could be left out. This creates clearer and more concise writing.

Example: *where are the plates at?*

Revision: *Where are the plates?*

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