

## Argumentative Discourse: A Problem in English- Arabic Translation

### Abstract

The translation of argumentative texts is not difficulties free. Learners of English as a foreign language most often fail to transfer the pragmatic content which is expressed to the target language. This paper aims at highlighting the links between pragmatic knowledge and the strategies involved in the performance of EFL learners in translating argumentative texts. In this connection, an experimental design has been opted for in which an experimental group and a control group of third year students of English, (40 students per each) take a pre-test and a post-test. The testees of the experimental group show a remarkable development in their translation performance after they were trained to translate four argumentative texts into Arabic in addition to being exposed to theoretical background about speech acts, argumentation and translation. On the contrary, the respondents of the control group keep on encountering the same difficulties in the pretest and the post-test with no change in their performance. This proves that there is a strong correlation between enhancing learners' theoretical knowledge about speech acts, argumentation and translation and learners performance in translating argumentative discourse.

**Keywords:** Argumentative texts, Speech acts, Translation, Pragmatics

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### ملخص

يواجه طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في معظم الأحيان صعوبات في نقل المعنى المعبر عنه في النصوص الجدلية إلى اللغة الهدف، وذلك لأن ترجمة النصوص الجدلية لا تخلو من الصعوبات. يهدف هذا المقال إلى تسليط الضوء على الروابط الموجودة بين المعرفة البراغماتية والاستراتيجيات التي يستخدمها الطلبة عند ترجمة النصوص الجدلية، وعليه تم اختيار نموذج تجريبي يقوم فيه طلبة الفوج التجريبي وطلبة فوج المراقبة بترجمة أربعة نصوص جدلية إضافة إلى تطوير معارفهم النظرية بخصوص أفعال الكلام والجدل والترجمة. وهنا يلاحظ تطور طلبة الفوج التجريبي بشكل كبير على عكس طلبة فوج المراقبة الذين لم يبدوا أي تغيير في نتائج الاختبار الأخير وهذا ما يثبت وجود علاقة متينة بين تعزيز معرفة الطلبة حول أفعال الكلام، والجدل والترجمة وبين ترجمة الخطاب الجدلي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** النصوص الجدلية، أفعال الكلام، الترجمة، البراغماتية.

### Introduction

Many studies have dealt with pragmatics, speech acts, and argumentation; but few of them investigate the aspect of translating argumentation as a speech act or deal with the performance of learners when translating such type of texts. Consequently, there is a need to focus on the differences between native speakers of English and EFL learners in terms of understanding and inferring the exact intended meaning either in written or spoken discourse. More precisely, there is a need to shed some light on translating

argumentative texts as a difficult type that contains argumentation as an illocutionary complex act.

### 1. Speech Acts and Argumentation

Understanding a language means not only dealing with its semantic level but also dealing with its pragmatic level. It is not enough to understand the literal meaning in order to infer the underlying meaning of an utterance but rather to focus on the pragmatic communicative interpretation of that utterance. Pragmatics, as Yule (1996: 3) states, is then “concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker or writer and interpreted by a listener or reader.” It should be specified that what makes an interaction fulfilled and successful is the context. This latter is very important, as Sbisà (2002: 421) argues, for it “enables us to describe speech acts as context-changing social actions.” It plays a crucial role in the description of speech acts. In other words, understanding the different contexts of utterances facilitates the recognition of different speech acts. In his lectures, Austin (1962) introduces a doctrine of three different acts: first, the act of saying something, technically called the locutionary act; second, the illocutionary act is to produce an act which entails conventional consequences and at the same time let a hearer know that the act is performed. In other words, the illocutionary act is the force that is performed after uttering an utterance. The third dimension, the perlocutionary act, is typically performed when words are issued, that is, it is the effect of the utterance on the reader or the listener. From all these types of speech acts, the illocutionary force is widely discussed and focused on by contrasting it with the two other acts, while Searle (1969) identifies the speech act as an illocutionary act per se. The different types of speech acts depend on the type of the illocutionary force which can be, in turn, determined by the performative verbs used in the utterance; for instance, apology ‘I apologize’, complaint ‘I complain’, promise ‘I promise’, invitation ‘I invite’, and so on. These types can be recognized at the level of sentences, other types can determine the type of larger linguistic units, texts such as description, narration, exposition and argumentation. Argumentation unlike other types is more difficult for EFL learners to be recognized, understood and translated. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004: 1) see argumentation as both a process of arguing and as a product resulting from arguing. They state:

Argumentation is a verbal, social, and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of the standpoint by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint.

In other words, the act of arguing involves the use of the language which is directed to other people; the arguer is a rational person who advances a standpoint which he/she defends aiming to convince the reader/listener with the acceptability of that standpoint.

Taking into account the nature of argumentation, Behrens, Rosen and Beedles (2005:64) insist that writing is “frequently intended to persuade- that is, to influence the reader’s thinking.” In order to succeed in doing this, the writer should follow a writing structure that can have an effect on the reader. First of all, the writer should; as they (*ibid.*) explain, “begin with an assertion that is arguable,” which is called the thesis statement. Then, the writer must know how to arrange the arguments to be used as

evidence to support the claim. Finally, the writer concludes the text by giving a summary, solution or rewriting the thesis statement.

## 2.The Difficulty in Translating Argumentative Texts

Students of English as a foreign language encounter problems in understanding argumentative texts and in translating them into Arabic. It is necessary for them to study argumentation from a pragmatic point of view in terms of speech acts; or namely the illocutionary act of arguing and the perlocutionary act of convincing. Learning argumentation in relation to pragmatics helps students translate argumentative texts more appropriately.

However, "success in persuasion requires more than a knowledge of the language" as Kearns (1995: 49) mentions. Because of their cultural specificity, the translation of authentic argumentative texts will be difficult for EFL learners; they would most probably translate them according to their semantic meaning but without paying attention to their pragmatic interpretation. Following the same line of thought, Al-Khuli (2001: 8) insists on producing the same perlocutionary effect when translating from the source language to the target one. He believes that obtaining equivalent source and target texts is based on transmitting the same perlocutionary act. If the translator succeeds to render the same meaning from one language to another, then the translation will be considered equivalent, faithful and successful. However, as he argues, this cannot be realized if the translator lacks the accurate and thorough knowledge of both source and target languages. This ability to translate faithfully grows with the possibility of having more practice and experience.

El-Shiyab (1990:331) raises an important point which explains that awareness of rhetorical and cultural styles resolves many problems in translating argumentative texts. He claims that the reader has to be aware of the intended meaning and of the structure of the source text as he states:

Because of the fact that Arabic and English utilize different rhetorical style for conveying their counter- argumentation, the Arabic reader is likely to misapprehend English counter-argument, and vice versa. However, the awareness of these rhetorical styles of both languages within the field of argumentation resolves this communicative problem.

Behrens, Rosen and Beedles (*op.cit.*:69) assert that for the argumentative text to be convincing, it "should be governed by principles of logic- clear and orderly thinking," which is at the same time biased, that is, as they explain, "an argument weighted toward one point of view and against others, which is in fact the nature of argument- may be valid as long as it is logically sound."

The texts that require pragmatic equivalence in translation are those complicated texts; argumentative texts are a good example of complicated texts. Aziz and Lataiwish (2000:129) consider journalistic texts as texts in which the main function is "to convey information". However, the style of such type of texts has a great importance. They see that the language used by journalists has developed especially in style. In other words, the journalist tries to convey information in a dramatic way that attracts the attention of

the reader just as the writer wants to influence his readers' opinions. It is observed that other types of texts like expository, descriptive or narrative texts are more or less difficult than argumentative ones for EFL learners either in understanding or in translating. Tirkkonen-Condit (1986) believes that argumentative texts are more difficult to translate than other types. So in order to clear off such a difficulty, he sees that what facilitates the students' task when translating argumentative texts is to provide students with the whole text and not only an extract of it, for the contextual situation of a text is very important to determine the ability of an EFL learner to translate it with less difficulty. What follows is a description of the research design which explains the procedure of the experiment this paper is based on.

### **3. Research Design**

#### **3.1. Subjects**

The subjects are selected randomly from a target population of third year students of Applied Language Studies, University of Constantine 1. Taking into consideration that this population is huge and cannot be easily controlled, a random sample of two groups (80 subjects) is selected representing an experimental group and a control group (40 subjects per each). The choice of this intended population is due to the fact that third year students of English are assumed to be exposed to English for an adequate period of time and the reason behind selecting 'Applied Language Studies' option is that they study argumentative texts in the Written Expression module and speech acts in the Pragmatics module in addition to the Translation module (3h per week).

#### **3.2. Research Method**

This paper is based on an experimental design and as a first step, both the experimental and the control groups take a pre-test in which the respondents are provided with an authentic argumentative text that is followed by specific questions about its form and the translation of its thesis statement and arguments. Then, only the experimental group- who receives the experiment gets a special treatment raising the testees' awareness about the link between speech acts and argumentation when translating four argumentative texts: 3 editorials from (The Guardian, The Observer and The Washington Post) and a text from a book. After translating four argumentative texts and in addition to being exposed to extra information about pragmatics, speech acts, argumentation and translation, the experimental group subjects are supposed to be more aware of the link between what they study in the different courses previously mentioned and how they deal with the translation of English argumentative texts. As a final step, both experimental and control groups take the post-test in which the testees are provided with an authentic argumentative text followed by specific questions about its form and the translation of the thesis statement and arguments.

#### **3.3. Results and Discussion**

The results of the pre-test and the post-test are summarized in the following tables that indicate the testees' scores, the scores' frequencies and the scores' percentages of both experimental and control groups in the pre-test and the post-test respectively.

Scores x	Frequency f	Percentage %
1	2	5
2	11	27.5
3	1	2.5
4	6	15
5	7	17.5
6	1	2.5
7	2	5
8	5	12.5
9	2	5
10	2	5
11	1	2.5
N	40	100

**Table1: Scores Frequencies and Percentages of the Experimental Group in the Pre-test**

The above table points out the scores of the experimental group in the pre-test which are almost below the average with only two scores 10 and 11 (only 3 subjects) above the average. It is clearly observed that the most frequent score is 2 as it occurs 11 times with a percentage of 27.5% which reflects the poor performance of the subjects in translating argumentative texts. More precisely, it reflects the testees' ignorance about recognizing the thesis statement and the arguments. It is the same case for the control group as its scores are similar to the results of the experimental group in the pre-test. As illustrated in table 2, we notice that 7 scores are below the average and only two scores are above the average (10 and 11) and the most frequent score is 2 with 27.5%.

Scores x	Frequency f	Percentage %
1	3	7.5
2	11	27.5
3	4	10
4	4	10
5	8	20
6	4	10
8	3	7.5
10	1	2.5
11	2	5
N	40	100

**Table 2: Scores Frequencies and Percentages of the Control Group in the Pre-test**

It is believed that the reason behind this poor performance of either the experimental or the control subjects in the pre-test is due to:

- The ignorance of the type or argumentative genre of the text to translate.
- The lack of accurate knowledge about argumentative discourse, mainly:
  - The thesis statement
  - The standpoints

- The arguments
- Types of argumentations
- Thelack of knowledge about pragmatics, especially about the speech acts to be used in argumentative discourse.
- The lack of awareness of the relationship between argumentative discourse and speech acts in translating argumentative texts.

The respondents reflect their poor performance in the pre-test when they choose the wrong type of text (e.g. expository) instead of argumentative; the wrong thesis statement instead of “**There is bitter dispute about where to strike this balance, partly because of competing economic and ideological interests, and partly because it is inherently difficult. But no one seriously denies that, at some point, a balance must be struck**” and even those who choose it did not give an adequate translation. The majority of respondents provide the following translation:

يوجد هناك نقاش حاد حول أين يمكن إحداث هذا التوازن تارة بسبب تنافس الاهتمامات الاقتصادية و الادبيولوجية و تارة أخرى بسبب أنه صعب وراثيا. لكن لا أحد ينكر أنه يجب إحداث التوازن في مستوى معين.

Instead of:

والنقاش محتدم حول كيفية إحداث التوازن, من جهة بسبب تدافع المصالح الاقتصادية و الادبيولوجية و من جهة بسبب التعقيد الناتج عن طبيعة النقاش ذاتها. لكن لا أحد ينكر أنه يجب إحداث التوازن كيفما كان (على مستوى معين).

The testees make the same mistakes in translating the arguments; for instance, they translate this argument:... **some of his administration’s actions had led the business community to conclude that the president recognized no cost-related limitations on federal regulation. There have been 132 regulations with benefits or costs of more than \$100 million created since Mr. Obama took the oath of office, with the rules implementing health care and financial legislation – and, possibly, carbon limits – still to be written,**as follows:

إن بعض أفعاله الإدارية أدت بالمجتمع التجاري ليستنتج أن الرئيس يعترف بأنه لا توجد حدود على فوائد القوانين الفدرالية. يوجد 132 قانونا (قوانين) بفوائد قيمتها أكثر من 100 مليون دولار منذ أخذ السيد أوباما زمام الإدارة. وكذلك قوانين تتعلق بالرعاية الصحية و التشريع المالي ومن المحتمل حدود كربونية سوف تكتب لاحقا.

Instead of:

ان بعض الممارسات الإدارية جعلت مجتمع أصحاب الأعمال يعتقد بأن الرئيس يقر بعدم وجود قيود تتعلق بالفوائد على القوانين الفدرالية.و كان هناك 132 قانونا يتعلق بالفائدة التي قيمتها أكثر من 100 مليون دولار منذ أدى السيد أوباما اليمين الدستورية. ولتعذر ذكر ذلك هاهنا, سنكتب لاحقا قوانين الحماية الصحية و التشريع المالي.

The following table concerns the scores of the experimental group in the post-test starting from the score 9 with one frequency and the percentage of 2.5% and it is the only score under the average. The six other scores are above the average with the most frequent one is 14 that occurs 16 times with a percentage of 42.5%. The highest score

16 occurs 8 times (8 subjects) with a percentage of 20%; 9 and 10 are the least frequent scores as they occur only once.

Scores x	Frequency f	Percentage %
9	1	2.5
10	1	2.5
12	5	12.5
13	7	17.5
14	16	42.5
15	2	5
16	8	20
N	40	100

**Table 3: Scores Frequencies and Percentages of the Experimental Group in the Post-test**

These high frequencies and percentages reflect the importance of the treatment and the role it plays in influencing the subjects' performance as this treatment attempts to shed some light on argumentative discourse and its translation into Arabic. This progress of the experimental group was clearly noticed in choosing the right thesis statement and arguments; and in providing more or less the adequate translation for each. They choose the statement "**But I believe that we have no right to use force, directly or indirectly, to prevent a fellow man from committing suicide, let alone from drinking alcohol or taking drugs**" as the thesis statement and the majority of the respondents give the following translation:

لكني أعتقد أننا لا نملك الحق في استعمال القوة بطريقة مباشرة أو غير مباشرة لمنع فرد من الانتحار ناهيك عن منعه من شرب الخمر أو تعاطي المخدرات.

For the translation of the arguments used in the post-test, the majority of the respondents were much more effective as they select the right arguments and provide an adequate translation for each. For instance, for the argument: **Prohibition is an attempted cure that makes matters worse for both the addict and the rest of us. Hence, even if you regard present policy towards drugs as ethically justified, considerations of expediency make that policy most unwise**, the testees provide this translation:

إن المنع هو محاولة علاج تجعل الأمور أكثر سوءاً بالنسبة للمتعاطي و حتى بقية المجتمع. فحتى لو اعتبرنا السياسة الحالية الخاصة بمحاربة المخدرات مبررة أخلاقياً، فمعاينة الواقع تجعل منها سياسة غير حكيمة.

On the contrary, the following table reveals the importance of the treatment in making the difference in respondents' performance.

Scores x	Frequency f	Percentage %
1	2	5
2	7	17.5
3	9	22.5

4	10	25
5	6	15
6	1	2.5
8	3	7.5
10	1	2.5
11	1	2.5
N	40	100

**Table 4: Scores Frequencies and Percentages of the Control Group in the Post-test**

Table 04 shows the difference in performance between the testees of the control and the experimental groups. They recorded approximately the same scores in the pre-test as the frequent score is 4 (11 times) with a percentage of 25%. All the scores are below the average except for the score 10 and 11 with the same percentage of 2.5%. The performance of the control group did not change in the post-test in that they still make mistakes in choosing the thesis statement and arguments and in providing the most appropriate translation. For example, for the testees who choose the right thesis statement, they translate it as follows:

لكني أعتقد أننا لا نملك أي حق في استخدام قوة مباشرة أو غير مباشرة, لمنع انسان من ارتكاب الانتحار و تركه وحيدا في شرب الكحول أو أخذ المخدرات.

In translating the argument mentioned before, the respondents of the control group give the following translation:

المنع هو علاج يحاول ان يجعل من الأمور أكثر للمدمن و الباقون منا، و إذن حتى ولو نظرنا إلى السياسة الحالية اتجاه المخدرات أنها مبررة أخلاقيا، فاعتبارات الواقع تجعل من هذه السياسة غير حكيمة.

Hence, we notice that the testees of control group make mistakes at the lexical, grammatical and semantic level, let alone the pragmatic level as the meaning of the source text is distorted.

The following table and figure illustrate the overall performance of the research sample third year students of English in understanding and translating English argumentative texts. For the pre-test, the table points out the representativeness of the sample on the one hand and the existence of the difficulty or problems for EFL learners on the other hand. However, the results of the post-test show the effectiveness of the treatment for the experimental group and at the same time confirm the results of the control group in the pre-test.

$$\bar{X} = \frac{\sum X}{n}$$

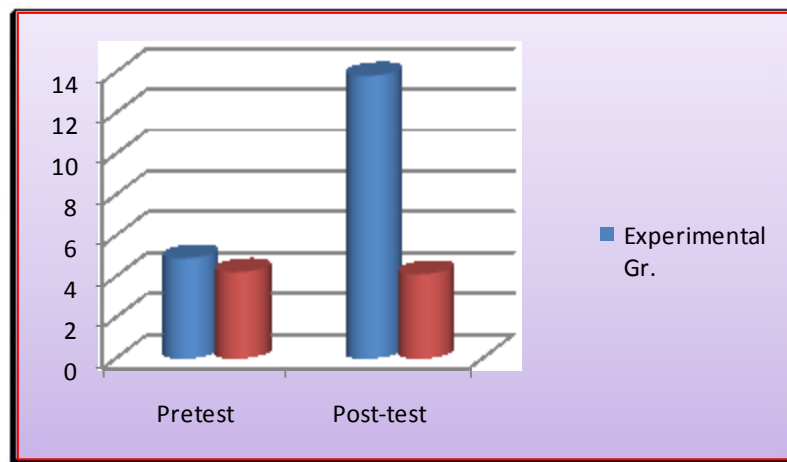
The mean is calculated as follows:

Mean X	Experimental group	Control group
Pre-test	4.88	4.2



Post-test	13.80	4.1
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**Table 5: Experimental and Control Groups' Means in the Pre-test and Post-test**



**Figure: Subjects Overall Performance in the Pre-test and Post-test**

Comparing the results of both groups in the pre-test and the post-test, we come to the following interpretations: First of all, in the pre-test where the testees are under no influencing variables; that is, they were equal in having the same information, instructions, time and place; the results show approximately the same mean  $\bar{X}$  in both the experimental group and the control group who score a mean of 4.88 and 4.2 respectively. These scoring scores reflect two important issues: the first is that the sample is representative of the target population in that the students are more or less homogeneous, and the second is that they have poor knowledge about the current issue under discussion which is ‘translating argumentative texts’ since they are not aware of the link found between pragmatics, speech acts, argumentation and translation. Second, after finishing the treatment directed to the experimental group, both groups took the post-test, a text to translate and with specific questions to be answered. The results show significant interpretations in that the experimental group scores a mean of 13.80 while the control group scores a mean of 4.1. These two means point out the positive influence of the treatment on the subjects of the experimental group because the difference between its mean in the pre-test, 4.88, and its mean in the post-test, 13.80, is significant and remarkable. However, the control group shows no improvement but rather the mean of the post-test, 4.1, is lower than that of the pre-test, 4.2.

So, we conclude that after having the treatment, the subjects of the experimental group became more aware of the link between different modules in translating argumentative texts, something which remains difficult for the subjects of the control group with no treatment. Third year students of English did not have a crystal clear idea about argumentative texts and how to translate them being aware of the relationship between what they study in Pragmatics, Written Expression and Translation courses. For that, it is recommended that:

- ✓ Teachers should make third year students more aware of the relationship between argumentation, speech acts and translation when translating argumentative texts in order to ameliorate their performance in translation.
- ✓ At the same time, third year students of English should enrich their knowledge about English and Arabic in the different genres and mainly argumentative discourse in order to ameliorate their performance in translating such types of texts.

### **Conclusion**

From what has been dealt with so far, it is clear that EFL learners need to become aware of how to deal with argumentative texts in translation. More precisely, in order to deal with such texts, 3<sup>rd</sup> years need to identify all what is related to this type of discourse and recognize the link between the different aspects of pragmatics, speech acts, argumentation and translation. In doing so, EFL learners will succeed in ameliorating their level and perform an adequate translation of the English text. They will also be able to understand the intended meaning after dealing thoroughly with the pragmatic context and speech acts used in argumentative texts.

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