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Morphosyntactic Errors in Urdu–English Translation among Higher Secondary School ESL Learners in South Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Morphosyntactic competence is central to translation for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners whose first language differs structurally from English. This study investigates morphosyntactic errors in Urdu-to-English translation among higher secondary students in South Punjab, Pakistan. Guided by Error Analysis, Contrastive Analysis, and Interlanguage Theory, it adopted a quantitative design and used an Urdu-English translation test. Data were collected from 750 students in government and private institutions across Dera Ghazi Khan, Multan, and Bahawalpur, and 120 scripts (40 per division) were selected for detailed analysis. A total of 1,136 errors were identified: 896 syntactic (78.87%) and 240 morphological (21.13%). Syntactic errors predominated in all divisions, among both male and female learners, and in both sectors, while their proportions varied across groups. The most persistent difficulties involved tense, verb forms, subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions, sentence structure, and word order. The study recommends strengthening grammar instruction, raising learners' awareness of structural differences between Urdu and English, and providing regular translation practice with constructive feedback. It contributes to Applied Linguistics, Translation Studies, and English language teaching.

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Introduction

Translation involves using grammatical and lexical resources of a target language to communicate the meaning of the source language. Translation can also show frequent problems and tendencies in the learner's language in L2 contexts which might not be so clear in regular language tasks. Urdu–English translation is quite relevant to the discussion of the linguistic issues and problems of ESL learners in the context of Pakistan where Urdu and English have significant roles in education and public life. Rahman (1996) outlines the general sociolinguistic aspects of language in Pakistan.

Morphosyntax is the relationship between the morphological form and syntactic organisation. Morphology studies grammatical forms and word structure, while syntax studies the order of words into phrases, clauses and sentences (Aronoff & Fudeman, 2011). Problems with tense, plurality and verb forms might then be accompanied by problems with agreement and sentence construction.

The principal analytical framework used in this study is Error Analysis. Corder (1967) laid the groundwork for the significance of analysing errors as evidence of development of L2 competence, and James (1998) gave a systematic account of error identification and analysis. Richards (1974) also pointed out that explanations need to go beyond L1 interference. Complementary to this, the Contrastive Analysis (Lado, 1957) approach focuses on the differences between the learner's L1 and L2 that can cause problems in learning. There are also works that concern second-language learning and cross-linguistic influence by Odlin (1989).

The two languages, Urdu and English, vary in several aspects of grammar, namely in terms of dominant constituent order, in terms of the use of articles, in terms of prepositions and postpositions, in terms of agreement and in terms of auxiliary usage. The differences serve as a reference point when making inferences about the potential problems of translation from Urdu to English and vice versa, but not when making inferences about the cause of individual errors.

Different studies in Pakistan have investigated grammatical errors in written L2 English and bilingual translation. Akbar et al. (2023) studied the errors made by secondary-school learners in their English paragraphs, and Dhamyal and Akbar (2024) explored the grammatical errors made by intermediate ESL learners in Urdu-English translation. Also, Shad et al., (2024) explored the topic of Urdu to English translation among the secondary school learners. While these studies conclude the relevance of grammatical error analysis, some differences in semantic, syntactic, and morphological level of education, type of task, geographical context and classification of errors raise the scope for further investigation of the grammatical error analysis in ESL contexts in Pakistan.

The present study looks into this need by investigating Urdu–English translation errors made by higher secondary ESL learners in South Punjab on morphosyntax level. It uses a quantitative method and focuses on 120 scripts chosen from the larger sample of 750 students in the translation test, with the aim of finding and measuring errors in all major categories of morphology and syntax.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer two research questions:

1. What are the most common morphosyntactic errors committed by ESL learners in bilingual translation?
2. How can these errors be classified based on linguistic features such as tense, word order, and subject-verb agreement?

Literature Review

The basic theoretical framework and prior studies related to morphosyntactic errors in Urdu–English translation of ESL learners are discussed in this literature review. It encompasses Error Analysis, Interlanguage Theory and Contrastive Analysis, along with important morphological and syntactic differences between Urdu and English. It also looks at previous researches to find out the scope of the research gap that this present study addresses in the Pakistani ESL context.

Error Analysis

Error Analysis offers a systematic way of analysing and describing learner errors. Corder (1967) believed that errors provided evidence of learners' developing linguistic competence, and James (1998) talked about how to identify and describe errors. In addition, Richards (1974) played an important role in the development of research approaches which recognize errors from the influence of the first language and errors from the process of the second language learning. The distinction is important since it can be caused by cross-lingual transfer, incomplete knowledge of the target language, overgeneralisation or other developmental processes involving errors in the target language. Therefore, the framework of Error Analysis (EA) serves as the main tool in this study for identifying and quantifying the morphosyntactic errors without assuming a single cause for the errors.

Interlanguage Theory

Selinker (1972) proposed Interlanguage Theory, a theory explaining the L2 learner's construction of an evolving linguistic system that is different from his L1 and L2 systems. Morphosyntactic errors in Urdu-English translations can be due to various reasons including lack of knowledge, overgeneralisation, influence of L1 and others. The theory complements Error Analysis which identifies and classifies errors, and Contrastive Analysis which helps in the understanding of possible errors due to the structural difference between Urdu and English. The present study does not test the processes involved in interlanguage development directly, but takes the Interpretive perspective of Interlanguage Theory.

The Contrastive Analysis and Cross-Linguistic Influences

According to contrastive analysis the differences between languages may lead to potential difficulties in learning (Lado, 1957). Cross-linguistic comparison is helpful for interpreting learner production although the strong claims of its utility have been challenged. The study of cross-linguistic influence also includes the concept of language transfer, discussed by Odlin (1989). Learners need to restructure meanings in the source language to the conventions of the

target language when translating. In this view, the present study adopts a complementary approach, Contrastive Analysis as a source of possible linguistic explanations is used to complement the Error Analysis that establishes the observed patterns.

Morphosyntax in Second-Language Learning

Morphosyntactic competence relates word forms and sentence structure. Morphological errors can be related to tense, plurality, and verb forms, while syntactic errors can be related to agreement, auxiliaries, articles, prepositions and constituent order. Aronoff and Fudeman (2011) address the relation between morphology and the grammatical structure, and Embick and Noyer (2007) look at the relation between syntax and morphology. The development of the grammatical competence is given a more general second language acquisition (SLA) focus (Ellis, 2015). Based on these views, the study in hand has separated morphological and syntactic errors, which are then identified for their respective distributions.

Urdu–English Structural Differences

There are a number of differences between Urdu and English which are of concern to translation. The basic word order used in Urdu is subject–object–verb (SOV) while the basic word order used in English is the subject–verb–object (SVO). There are also differences in aspects of agreement and inflection in the languages, definiteness and indefiniteness, articles, and the position of prepositions and postpositions. English uses auxiliary structures as per the grammatical pattern of grammar which may be different from that of Urdu grammar.

These contrasts offer a language perspective for the analysis of sentence structure, word order, article use, prepositions, agreement and auxiliary errors. It is important, however, to note that there are structural differences that need to be taken into consideration in determining whether or not the error was caused by first-language transfer, because other factors, such as incomplete target-language knowledge and overgeneralization, may have played a role.

Empirical Foundations of Translation Studies in Pakistani ESL Contexts

Studies in Pakistan report grammatical problems in English writing and bilingual translation. Akbar et al. (2023) studied errors in secondary school students' written English paragraphs, and Mahmood et al. (2020) conducted a study on the morphological errors in ESL students' expressions in Pakistan. These studies offer relevant evidence of grammatical difficulties other than translation.

A number of studies have been conducted regarding the aspect of translation. Farman (2019) studied syntactic errors of intermediate learners in government colleges of Lahore, where he found that the sentence structure, agreement, tense, and articles were problematic areas. Achakzai and Khajjak (2021) investigated the syntactic errors made by university EFL students in Quetta in translating Urdu works to English. Khurshid and Hassan (2015) studied the challenges associated with English prepositions in translation, and Khurshid et al. (2021) examined the grammatical errors along with learner's mental associations. The study of Dhamyal and Akbar (2024) investigated bilingual translation errors made by the ESL learners at intermediate level in District Layyah, and they found 1240 grammatical errors out of 32

participants. Shad et al. (2024) investigated Urdu-to-English translation among secondary-school learners, focusing on difficulties and possible remedies

Research on translation errors outside Pakistan also helps in the conversation of translation errors. For instance, Shiddiq et al. (2023) examined lexical and grammatical errors in the translated texts from Indonesian – English. All of the above studies highlight the importance of the cross-learner and cross-translator analysis of grammatical errors. Direct comparisons among studies are, however, restricted because of the differences in educational level, task type, research design, and error classification.

Translation is more than just replacing words: it involves the production of target language structures that meet the target language requirements of the intended message. Baker (2018) and Munday (2022) talk about the linguistic and textual choices that are made during translation. The view point is applicable to the current research since the error categories could be word-level grammatical form and sentence level organization.

Research Gap

Some studies have explored grammatical errors in writings and translations of Pakistani learners; however, other issues such as the difference in learner groups, research task and classification systems deserve further investigation. By specific, a focused quantitative description of both types of errors (morphological and syntactic) made by higher secondary level learners of South Punjab is required. To bridge the gap, the present study is designed to analyzing the subsample of 120 Urdu-to-English translation scripts out of the main sample 750 students from the three divisions of South Punjab: Dera Ghazi Khan, Multan and Bahawalpur. It classifies and quantifies multiple morphosyntactic error categories within the same analytical corpus.

Method

Research Design

The present study is quantitative in nature which focused on Urdu-to-English translation errors of higher secondary ESL learners from South Punjab, Pakistan. An Error Analysis approach was employed as the main framework to identify and categorize errors, and a contrastive analysis approach was used to complement this to investigate the potential gaps in the grammatical system between Urdu and English. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe the distribution of errors.

Research Instrument and Translation Task

The primary instrument was a translation test which consisted of one paragraph in Urdu selected from the Grammar and Composition book from the Punjab Education, Curriculum, Training and Assessment Authority (PECTAA). The paragraph was translated by students in 30 minutes in the classroom with no dictionaries or external help. All participants were given the same passage, and were administered under the same conditions.

Participants and Analytical Corpus

A total of 750 higher secondary students, 250 from each of the three divisions of South Punjab (Dera Ghazi Khan, Multan and Bahawalpur) participated in the overall sample. 120 translation scripts were chosen by a systematic sampling procedure for detailed analysis of errors. Within each division, scripts were organised into the relevant institutional sectors and gender groups, numbered, and selected at fixed intervals from a predetermined starting position, yielding 40 scripts per division. The 1,136 morphosyntactic errors reported in this article were identified exclusively in these 120 scripts, not in the full sample of 750 students.

Error Classification

The errors found were categorized into two general categories: morphological errors and syntactic errors. The morphological errors included plural-form, tense, adjective-form and verb-form errors. The syntactic errors were sentence-structure, article, preposition, subject–verb agreement, auxiliary-verb, word-order, and correlative-conjunction errors. Each identified error was allocated to the category it belonged in for quantitative analysis.

Data Analysis

The found errors were coded and categorized according to the morphological and syntactic categories. Frequencies and percentages were computed in IBM SPSS Statistics for each error category and for the two overarching domains of morphological and syntactic errors. The descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze the distribution of morphosyntactic errors in the analytical corpus of 120-scripts.

Results

Overall Distribution of Errors

The 120-script analytical corpus was analyzed and a total of 1,136 morphosyntactic errors were found. The overall distribution of these errors is given in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 Distribution of Morphological and Syntactic Errors in Urdu–English Translation

Error type	Error category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Morphological	Plural form	79	32.92
Morphological	Tense	71	29.58
Morphological	Adjective form	53	22.08
Morphological	Verb form	37	15.42
	Total morphological errors	**240**	**100.00**
Syntactic	Sentence structure	242	27.01
Syntactic	Articles	174	19.42
Syntactic	Prepositions	143	15.96
Syntactic	Subject–verb agreement	99	11.05
Syntactic	Auxiliary verbs	96	10.71
Syntactic	Word order	89	9.93
Syntactic	Correlative conjunctions	53	5.92
	Total syntactic errors	**896**	**100.00**

Grand total	**1,136**	**100.00**

Note. Percentages for individual morphological categories are calculated from 240 morphological errors; percentages for individual syntactic categories are calculated from 896 syntactic errors. Domain-level percentages are 21.13% morphological and 78.87% syntactic.

Of the 1,136 errors, 896 (78.87%) were syntactic and 240 (21.13%) were morphological. The largest number of errors that occurred in the morphological category was plural-form (79; 32.92%) and the second was tense error (71; 29.58%). Sentence-structure errors were the most common type of syntactic error (242; 27.01%), followed by article errors (174; 19.42%) and then preposition errors (143; 15.96%). In the syntactic category, the fewest errors were correlative-conjunction errors (53; 5.92%). Syntactic errors represented in general the largest part of the errors in the analyzed scripts. The results do not stand on their own, but point to the selected corpus and do not provide independent proof of the causes of errors.

Discussion

Predominance of Syntactic Errors

Syntactic errors (78.87%) outnumbered the morphological errors (21.13%) indicating that sentence-level grammatical organization was the major aspect of difficulty in the analyzed translations. This pattern facilitates the study of the grammatical constructs and not the grammatical errors in general. Past studies on ESL learners in Pakistan have also looked at the repeated grammatical and syntactic errors that occur in translation and production of written texts (Farman, 2019; Mahmood et al., 2020).

Sentence Structure Errors

Sentence-structure errors were the largest category of syntactic errors, with 242 errors (27.01%). Linguistic issues that can arise include Urdu subject–object–verb (SOV) versus English subject–verb–object (SVO) word order. The learner may thus have to restructure sentence elements in line with English conventions in the translation process. These observed frequencies, however, do not provide evidence for the role of first-language influence in creating these errors, because it is possible that they are due to incomplete knowledge of English syntax and/or to other learning factors.

Article and Preposition Errors

The number of article errors was 174 (19.42%) and preposition errors were counted 143 (15.96%). These categories can be referred as structural difference between Urdu and English. The Urdu language does not have an article system similar to a, an and the in English, and the Urdu language employs postpositions to the English language which uses prepositions. Such differences offer a useful backdrop to consider the results, but do not confirm the cause for errors at the individual level.

It appears that the use of article in context, such as definiteness and countability, as well as the meanings and patterns of use of English prepositions, might be emphasized in instruction. Learners may be helped to use these forms more accurately through the use of contextual examples, guided translation, and corrective feedback.

Subject–Verb Agreement, Auxiliary Verbs, and Word Order Errors

Other types of errors included subject–verb agreement errors (99; 11.05%), auxiliary-verb errors (96; 10.71%), and word-order errors (89; 9.93%). Word Order errors refer to the order of the elements of a sentence, while agreement and auxiliary errors refer to grammatical relations of the verb constructions. These types of sentence structure issues are important to address in addition to more general sentence structure issues.

The Urdu–English differences could be useful for analyzing these errors, but the descriptive data would not distinguish between errors occurring due to transfer from the first language, lack of knowledge of the second language, and overgeneralization. They might be tackled in teaching sentences in various ways, such as undergoing sentence-building, guided translation and contextual correction.

Morphological Errors

Morphological errors were 240 (21.13% of all errors identified). Plural-form errors were the most frequent (79; 32.92% of morphological errors), followed by tense errors (71; 29.58%), adjective-form errors (53; 22.08%), and verb-form errors (37; 15.42%). The findings indicate that the major error categories among morphological errors are plural form and tense errors.

The distribution is relevant in research on those grammatical errors in the written production of ESL learners in Pakistan including Mahmood et al. (2020). However, caution should be taken in making comparisons as there may be differences in demands placed on learners depending on the type of writing. Although morphological errors are not very high in terms of the total errors, they are still important for the grammar teaching. Instructing in sentence-level grammar, then, could be supplemented by practice in plural formation, tense marking, and word-form selection.

Theoretical Interpretation

The results show that Error Analysis (EA) is useful in highlighting, categorizing and measuring the grammatical problems of learners' translations. The analysis categorizes the errors into morphological and syntactic error types and classifies the sub-types of these two major types of errors, so it offers a systematic presentation of the errors in the selected corpus which accords with EA's function of analyzing learner language (Corder, 1974).

Interlanguage Theory offers a more general explanation of these findings. Selinker (1972) proposed that second language learners construct a developing system of language, which is neither their L1 nor their second language (L2). The errors noticed in this text could be related to the learning of English, to the lack of knowledge of the grammatical structure of the language, or to the possible L1 interference. The quantitative findings, however, are descriptions of the errors, and not an actual testing of the processes of interlanguage development.

Contrastive Analysis (CA) is used in conjunction with EA to analyze the differences between Urdu and English in terms of constituent order, articles, prepositions and postpositions, and grammatical marking. Such differences can be useful in the interpretation of specific error patterns but do not provide information about the source of the errors. The results thus offer a descriptive account of difficulties of learners without attempting to explain them.

Pedagogical Implications

Based on the results, there are some priorities that are suggested for the instruction of higher secondary English. Sentence construction should be given special consideration, because the sentence structure errors were the most common syntactic category. Plurals and tenses can be covered by providing examples with context from English and Urdu in order to use and compare them, and by providing focused morphological exercises.

Translation tasks can also be used as diagnostic tools to help teachers recognize errors that are repeated in their students' work, and to create focused remedial tasks. Formative assessment, corrective feedback and guided error analysis can be effective in allowing learners to identify and correct their grammatical problems. The recommendations are based on the observed patterns, but were not tested in the present study.

Conclusion

This study focused on morphosyntactic errors made by the higher secondary ESL students in selected settings in South Punjab, Pakistan, in Urdu–English translation. A total of 750 students were included in the larger sample, but 120 of these students' translation scripts were used for the analysis (a total of 1,136 errors were identified). The syntactic errors predominated over the morphological errors, and accounted for 78.87% of the total errors, while morphological errors accounted for 21.13% of the total errors. The most common syntactic category and the most common morphological category were sentence-structure errors and plural-form errors, respectively, followed by tense errors.

The study describes the common problem areas of the selected corpus and suggests the areas that could be targeted in teaching. The results of this study offer inputs to the study of Urdu–English translation in the study context of higher secondary ESL learners.

Limitations

The analysis covered 120 scripts selected from the broader sample of 750 students; therefore, the reported frequencies describe the analytical subsample, not the complete sample. The quantitative analysis identifies error patterns but does not establish their causes. Although Urdu–English structural differences may help interpret some patterns, first-language transfer cannot be assumed to explain every error. Finally, the study focuses on morphosyntactic errors and does not examine lexical, semantic, pragmatic, discourse, or stylistic aspects of translation.

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