Teaching Arabic Syntax for Non-Speakers: A Pragmatic Approach

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Abstract—In spite of the noticeable progress witnessed in the research fields of modern linguistics, the process of teaching syntax to Non- native speakers still relies on traditional and formal methods and does not properly benefit from the linguistic research outcome with regard to "contextual pragmatics". At the present, context is considered the center of pragmatics where meaning is emphasized in relation to its actual use in a specific situation, i.e. pragmatics deals with the interpretation of meaning in its specific context, establishing a relation between language and context towards a deeper understanding of language. In other words, interpreting the meaning of an utterance requires not only its direct and referential meaning but also equating the utterance with its context (the communicative situation, time, place, participants of the communicative event plus all factors that build up the environment of the utterance) to be able to conclude all aspects of the explicit as well as the implicit intended meaning of a well–formed syntactic construct. This paper endeavors to establish a new approach that makes a distinction between two syntactic concepts: "linguistic syntax" and "contextual syntax". Understanding these two concepts means understanding a wide range of language meanings and functions expressed in a specific situational context. Contextual syntax in particular enrich syntactic interpretation with deeper, more comprehensive and elaborate understanding. This approach will help language users to use proper constructs in their proper situations to avoid ambiguity or misinterpretation of the message intended. The Non- native speakers today are in dire need for a new philosophy and approach in dealing with language, being equipped with more comprehensive competence that could enable them use the language properly as a means of expressing the linguistic functions, each in its syntactic form as well as contextual situation proper.

Index Terms—pragmatics, syntax, context, functions

I. Introduction

In the past few years, learning the Arabic language began to gain greater attention for learners all over the Islamic world as well as the Western world. It is worth mentioning that the Arabic language has shifted from being the language of Islam only to be widely acknowledged as an international language. Thus, here emerged the need for new pedagogical approaches to teach the language, the syntax in particular. Those approaches could help international students to meet the various needs and purposes behind learning the language.

What non-speakers of the Arabic language need is a new approach to learn Arabic syntax, its varied functions and meanings in varied contexts and communicative environments, so that they could communicate appropriately and effectively in a way that serves their needs.

Studying syntax which is merely based on the correctness or accuracy of formal structures, inflection, or parsing is not sufficient in the modern age. Interestingly, ancestors argued that the syntax of each era has to go in harmony with other sciences to serve the contemporary needs of a society in that era. [1]

In the past, Arabic grammarians passed a period where syntactic and linguistic errors prevailed- a fact that obliged them to emphasize the correctness and accuracy of the formal structure of the language and its inflections to protect the Arabic language for being lost or changed. In this stage, what is called the syntax of inflection or sentence syntax has obtained the focus of the grammarians' interest.

In another phase of the Arabic language development, the Arabic language scholars had to focus on particular philosophical parts hence appeared a new theory titled the syntax of the agent. In a later stage, the semantic and rhetorical perspective of language acquired more weight, particularly to study the meanings of the Quran and its miraculous expressions and structures, there the syntax was termed the semantic syntax or rhetorical syntax.

In the modern stage, more focus has been paid to the functional use of language, hence appeared what is called the functional syntax. Such tendency helps learners or users of language to employ the syntactic structures that best fit the various contexts.

Within the new global and technological changes in the contemporary era, a new thought of syntax which is contextual syntax should be added and utilized next to inflectional syntax, agent syntax, rhetorical syntax and functional syntax. To obtain a successful and effective communication, contextual and pragmatic parameters are to be considerably taken into account.

Therefore, teaching syntax for the non-speakers in the modern time cannot achieve the success aspired if the new linguistic theories and context-driven teaching approaches are not adopted. It is urgent then to include the contextual pragmatics to teach syntax in order to create a radical change in understanding the language from a mere set of formal rules and structures to actual performances appropriate and functional in a specific communicative situation or context.

Before getting into the details of the Pragmatic school of teaching the Arabic syntax, it is significant to shed light on the most renowned schools of teaching languages nowadays, they are :

A. The Traditional Grammar School

This school deals with language as isolated formal and structural lexicographical, syntactic, and morphological units. This school does not consider the living and dynamic nature of langue [2]. Rather it sees language as static forms and structures controlled with the standard of syntactic correctness [3]. The word or the syntactic rule is equated with its translation without linking it to real life situations.

B. The Structural Linguistic School (Aural and Oral)

The Aural-Oral School is based on providing the students with specific linguistic constructs and patterns with their matching communicative situations [4]. Techniques offered in teaching are drilling and imitation (mimicry) of the required language patterns. Memorizing and imitating those fixed patterns will help the student to use them in similar situations. However, language in this school is not linked with cgnitive analys [5] or socially real-driven contexts. [6]

C. The Transformational Generative Linguistics School

The Transformational Generative Linguistic School does not encourage students to blindly memorize and imitate fixed patterns; rather it stimulates the student's ability to deduce the syntactic rules and constructs. However, this school did not provide clear cut techniques and approaches regarding how to apply its principles in teaching the language. [7]

D. Functional linguistic School

In the Functional Linguistic School, language is valued as a means of communication to convey specific messages and achieve the intended goals of communication. [8] This school is based on the notion of deploying the linguistic system in the correct way that will ensure conveying meaning effectively; i.e. link form with meaning. Moreover, the school is concerned with structuring the sentences from words to achieve the meanings sought to be achieved by the language users.

E. The Sociolinguistics School

The Sociolinguistic School adopts an approach that assists the language learner to employ linguistic constructs and units in their appropriated social situations and contexts. However, this school highlights social situations more than linguistic rules and the syntactic accuracy.

This school also could be criticized for overlooking the illucutionalry effect intended on the readership or addressee and the aesthetic options the language offers to rhetorically leave more influential and clearer message. Accuracy and clarity could be formulated in more aesthetic linguistic structures and choices, particularly when the discourse recipient is given the weight that should be.

F. Contextual Pragmatic School

The Contextual Pragmatic School, which this study calls for adopting, examines language in its every detail. It is not only concerned with the communicative meanings of language, but also with the tiny details of the communicative force and aesthetic and creative effect that language could leave on the addressee the effect intended. [9] The Pragmatic school takes into careful consideration how to choose from the varieties offered in the language syntax the structures that could be not only meaningful but also persuasive enough for readers to appreciate and perform. To achieve this, the language learner is taught how to build the construct in the manner that bests suits his/her addressee in a specific communicative situation.

This Pragmatic school, moreover, invites learners to use the language constructs in their appropriate contexts in order to satisfy the needs of both language producer and recipient. In other words, it is imperative to use the language that meets the purpose of the language producer and his/her social and psychological status on a specific contextual situation as well as the effect intended to be obtained from the addressee. Important also at the same time is the status of the addressee. In other terms, 'how" is more important than what.

II. TEACHING SYNTAX FOR NON SPEAKERS PRAGMATICALLY

In different communicative situations, pragmatic rules and principles, which are dependent on the context and culture, are significantly required as well as other linguistic rules. That is, violating pragmatic rules will also lead to failure in communication.

For example, in a social context of a funeral, some old friends might meet each other, or even some people may like to get to know people. Is it possible in this context to pay social courtesy and greetings and say: "Nice or my pleasure to meet you", certainly not. [10] In the same context of the funeral, when people who came to pay condolences are served coffee, as is in the Arab culture, is it acceptable to utter the courtesy expressions when served food or drinks and say "Daymeh", which means "May it be always". Any language user who is aware of the culture and the communicative situation of paying condolences in funerals would never accept such deviation of language that simply leads to offence, even though the syntactic material used is correct.

In another social communicative dialogue, a person might ask his friend:"Do you smoke?" receiving the answer:"No, thank you." While the person does not mean to offer cigarette, so he will reply:"I am just checking if you smoke or not."

Furthermore, in different environments, words might acquire different meanings which might result in a variety of language dialects. Not being aware of the differences between dialects will lead to misunderstanding and break in communication. Many examples could be cited in the Arab world. In Egypt, for example, the adjective "mabsout" means happy; while in Iraq, the same word means "harshly beaten". Another example is the social

expression of "Yaa'tiq Ala'fya". In the Eastern parts of the Arab world, this expression is used positively to wish someone health and strength. However, in the Western parts of the Arab world, the same expression is negatively used and equated with fire.

In such cases, the misuse of language that led to break in communication was due to breaking the rules of pragmatics, not syntax or morphology, for instance.

There are other syntactic structures that are affected by the reader's status in a specific communicative situation/context. Some of these structures are in the use of the particles Ennama, Ma, and Ella. For example, "Ennama Aljaw Matirun." "The weather is rainy, indeed." is used when the recipient is knowledgeable and agrees with the speaker. However, in the use of Ma and Ella is more to be more effective when the addressee or the khabar (predicate) is doubtful or at wrong terms, such as in "Ma Hwa Ella Mukhtie'" "He is not but mistaken".

Taking into careful consideration the relationship between the language communicators in a communicative event in addition to their sociocultural status, age, etc. was not foreign or odd for the old Arab grammarians. On the contrary, syntactic choices were adapted in accordance with all factors of context and its participants. To illustrate, many syntactic constructs, though similar in structure, vary in their use and hence meaning with regard to the obligations of a specific context, such as in the use of prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, coordinators, amongst others.

Thus, syntax is not a mere set of rigid rules. Syntax, instead, gives language users the latitude to choose from many structures and syntactic constructs: when to use such syntactic constructs and in which contexts – this is the rule to be learned and applied to serve the meaning and message intended of an utterance.

The contextual pragmatics calls for shifting from competence to performance. [11] Therefore, this paper also calls for employing such tendency in teaching Arabic for non-speakers, i.e. to use the language in real practice and real life-driven situations, not as static and formal entity. This is to be applied in teaching the four skills of listening and speaking, reading, and writing, in which the rules of language as well as its functional and aesthetic perspectives are merged in a smooth and gradual way. Such approach of teaching on the principle of "Likuli maqal maqam" "Every utterance has its own context" should be as this study suggests applied in preparing the curricula of both primary and secondary school stages.

In sum, the study suggests that it is inevitable to relate pragmatic perspectives with syntax; withstanding the fact that such concept is deeply rooted in the old Arabic language heritage. Examining the works of old Arabs shows their thoughtful consideration and analysis of context in which specific syntactic constructs were used to do with language and achieve a specific aim. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice the considerable weight old Arabs gave to the role and status of discourse recipients in a communicative situation – a fact that significantly determines the linguistic and syntactic choices made in that situation.

III. PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF TEACHING ARABIC SYNTAX FOR NON-SPEAKER

A. Naming and Calling

Let us examine the variety of syntactic constructs one needs to call someone. Most of such structures use the particle of Alnidaa' (naming/calling) (Ya); however, the way and order will vary in different contexts. For example, if Said is a man who is a teacher and who has a son named Salah. Calling him will vary according to the relationship between the two communicators and the social or cultural contexts, not only the syntactic structures:

1) If someone is a close friend or colleague with similar age and status, he will call him "Ya Said" or just his first name "Said".

2) If another communicator has more formal relation, or much younger, it will not be acceptable to call him with the first name, he might use instead the nickname "Aba Saleh".

3) If one of Mr. Said's students wanted to call him, he would use the appropriate title, and ever with his first name, otherwise, the student might receive a harsh punishment as to be put in a disciplinary committee.[12]

It is easily noted that all the previous structures to call Mr. Said are syntactically correct. However, the accuracy of use is equally important, therefore the accuracy of using those structures rely on the cultural and social situation. [13]

The surrounding environment of language and the specific contextual factors of an utterance, such as the relationship between the communicators, their status, age, and so forth must be given careful consideration in the actual use of language to achieve a successful communication.

Calling or naming someone could acquire other meanings such as temptation, lamenting, or forbidding in the light of the context. [14]

Hereunder further examples of how to use syntax and its constructs when the addressee is a major concern – a fact that makes the communication more successful.

B. Conjunctions of Addition

Addition in the Arabic language is realized through the use of the conjuctions: wa, fa, thummah, hatta, aw, am, bal, la, laken). Old Arabic scholars did give a considerable attention to the various pragmatic uses of conjunctions. Abdulqahir Aljurjani said that it is not enough to know the formal syntactic meaning of a conjunction, it is more important to choose the right one in the suitable context. [15]

In the Quranic verse "And it is He who feeds me and gives me to drink; And when I am ill it is He who cures me."[16]

The wa (and) is used for addition, adding feeding to drinking in this verse. Between sickness and remedy, the conjunction used was "fa"(then) to indicate correct consequence since remedy comes after sickness. When the verse talks about life after death, the conjunction "Thumma" (after that) was used to indicate that the time

gap in such sequence is pretty long. Hence every conjunction serves the function intended to fit the meaning of the context.

Ibn Alatheer said that the meanings of conjunctions were used functionally in different contexts. [17] Such delicate meanings are common in all Arabic books.

C. Prepositions

In the Arabic syntax curricula, learners are taught the syntactic structure of the prepositional phrase as a dependency known as (Jar wa majrur). The preposition (harf jar) comes before a noun and places the noun into the genitive case (majror).

The current study calls for including the pragmatic and contextual perspective in how to use such structure. Ibn Alatheer said: "Many people misuse the Arabic prepositions, i.e. some use the preposition "in", while they should use "on", or vice versa. Learners hence should be taught how to use such prepositions pragmatically as dictated by the context.

In the Quranic verse: "Who are neglectful of their prayers" "Allathin hum a'n salatihim sahoon"[18], Ibn Abbas said Alhamdullelah (Thanks to Allah) that it is said in the Quran the appropriateness of using the preposition a'n (of), rather than (in). [19]

In another example, in Saba' Sura: "Who provides for you from the heavens and the earth?" Say," Allah. And indeed, we or you are either upon (a'la) guidance or in (fi) clear error."[20] Alsayuti said: commenting on this Quranic verse that "upon" "a'la" is equated with the true guidance since it is usually indicative of contexts referring to nobility and transcending, while "in" is used here for the manifest error.[21]

Pragmatically, this could be understood that "upon" renders the sense of transcending, above the low and mundane world; whereas "in" gives the sense of drowning in a low, mundane sphere, involved in mischief. Hence "on" or "upon" are prepositions usually used with the contexts of true path of guidance and morally above and beyond anything low or mundane in life, opposite to "in" in this context. Similar uses of these prepositions could be found in the Holy Quran confirming the same connotative meanings of those prepositions.

D. Disclaimers

Selecting which disclaimer or particles (such as "ennama", "ma", and "ella") to use is dependent on the status of the addressee and the context. [22] The first particle "انما" "ennama" is used to address someone who believes in what is said to him and agrees with as in "Ennama Muhammadun Akhouk" "Muhammadun is your brother, indeed" [23] To stress on the truth value of the fact being said. While the particles "ma and ella" are used in the same sentence to stress the truth value of a fact being said to someone who is doubtful of what the speaker is saying as in: "Ma hwa ella musibun" [24] "He is not but an accurate person"; i.e. ma (not) will negate all qualities related to the person except for the quality that comes after ella (but).

E. Corroborative or Emphasis Particles

When context, for instance, necessities stress or emphasis, particularly when the recipient is doubtful or not responding, the syntactic constructs that indicate such emphasis are to be used, such as in "Enna Alriyadah Mufida" "To do sports is useful" or "I swear doing sports is very useful". The opposite is true, i.e. if the situation does not require emphasis, i.e. the recipient is positively certain and responding, there will be no need for syntactic tools of emphasis; as in the example Alriaday mufidah""Sports is useful".

All sentences using emphasis tools or particles such as "Enna" are similar in terms of syntactic structures and order. However, deciding to use those structures or not does not refer to syntactic reasons; rather it is decided on other contextual factors, the reader's status, in particular.

F. Interrogation, Imperative, and Wishing

Teaching Arabic for non-native speakers the pragmatic uses of the syntactic structures of interrogation, imperatives, and wishing helps the learners to recognize the varied meanings acquired when using each of them in different contexts. For example, in the interrogative structures, the language user employs a variety of interrogative or question words such as when, why, who, etc. seeking a particular piece of information. However, when used in specific contexts, those basic meanings will serve totally different language functions at the pragmatic level, such as wishing, sarcasm, blaming, threatening, etc. Take the question "Don't I know you?": when it is asked to someone already known, the question acts to give the meaning of denial and surprise.

Using imperatives is a syntactic structure that is used basically to command. However, such structure may acquire completely different meanings being employed in specific contexts. For instance, when you address or command someone to do things you are aware of his/her inability to do as in "Do it", the function turns to be challenge not command.

Wishing is a speech act that is realized by using particles such as "layta" "ليت" to indicate that something is desired though difficult to obtain, in addition to "law" "لو", "La'al" "العل" which can pragmatically be used for the same function. Utilizing "layta" in different contexts may serve different functions: threatening, challenge, and more. In the example, "I wish you could speak to me": if it is addressed to someone whom it is difficult to talk to, the structure would turn to mean a plea or a request rather than a wish. Thus, al Sakaki said varying the uses and communicative functions of such particles refers to the necessity of context and its effect on the clarity of the meaning intended. [25]

In line with the aforementioned, teaching the Arabic language applying the pragmatic and contextual approach paves the way for learners to achieve their goals and intents form learning the language. The new curricula of teaching Arabic titled (Arabic for Specific Purposes) is considered the first step forward to adopt the pragmatic approach. Such curricula will assist the students to

predetermine the purpose behind studying Arabic and accordingly join the program that is designed to best meet their needs.

To clarify, if the student seeks to learn Arabic for the purpose of reading and understanding the Holy Quran, a program should be designed in a way that emphasizes this field.

In reality, non- speakers of the Arabic language usually sit for a proficiency exam to determine the level they should join. In one class, students of all needs and learning targets sit together to take the same program offered for their level.

The purposes behind learning a language may vary to be scientific, cultural, religious, and vocational and so forth. Is it acceptable to offer one unified program or curriculum to teach Arabic for all students whatever their targets or needs are?

IV. Conclusion

The different schools of teaching the Arabic language unfortunately mainly focused on the accuracy of inflection and parsing of the ends of words, and the accuracy of the rules of syntax. Unfortunately, such tendency for teaching the non-speakers of Arabic is not practical enough or satisfactory unless such rules are linked with the actual contexts and communicative practices of language, socially and culturally.

It is imperative as this study argues to give the learners the opportunity to experience language in real-life driven situations and events to practice and to learn language appropriateness, which is a focal principle in using language. Furthermore, linking language with life and contexts of reality creates an interesting and motivating learning environment to practice the syntax appropriately in a social or cultural situation so that the message and meaning could be successfully achieved.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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