

Perceptions of Vowels and Consonants in Arabic and English: Implications for Translators and Dictionary Users

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Abstract—This paper investigates Arabic terms used as equivalents for English consonants and vowels. The Arabic terms, namely *harf sakin* (consonants) and *harakat* (vowels), are specifically tailored for the study of Arabic linguistic items. In bilingual dictionaries, Arabic terms do not truly reflect the linguistic realities represented by English vowels and consonants. The aim of the study is therefore to identify the linguistic realities that the Arabic terms represent within the Arabic linguistic environment. A sketch of contrastive analysis of vowels and consonants in English and Arabic helps in clarifying the linguistic meanings, which are absent from bilingual dictionaries. The findings of the study show that Arabic lexical equivalents are simply sense- indicators and thus not sufficient, as the totality of the conceptual meaning of the item is not provided in bilingual dictionaries. The study concludes by briefly discussing some of the study's implications for translators and other dictionary users.

Index Terms—consonant clusters, syllable, nunation, prolongation, doubling sounds

I. INTRODUCTION

A close look at Arabic and English linguistic systems shows that there is no exact match between all English letters and their Arabic counterparts. Awde and Samano (2002, p. 18) state that “Arabic has some twenty-nine letters of which twenty- six are consonants, and two of the other three sometimes stand for consonants as well”. English, by contrast, has up to 28 consonants and five or six vowels if only vowel letters are considered. Ladefoged (2005) mentions that- in addition to A E I O U, English has sometimes Y as a vowel as far as letters are concerned. As far as sounds are concerned, Ladefoged (2005, p. 26) holds that “English has many more vowels because each vowel letter represents two sounds, one when it is by itself, and another when it is used in combination with the silent E”. Although English has ten different vowels illustrated in cut cute, mat mate, cod code, pet pete, kit kate, mat mate, the number of vowels English has is largely determined by dialects. Ladefoged maintains that “ in Canada and the U.S. there are fifteen vowel sounds, indicating that this number does not include the various possible ways vowels can be spelled in written English” (p. 28).

Unlike English, Arabic has two semi-vowels and six vowels (three long vowels with phonetic representations u: aa i: and three short ones u a i. Awde and Samano (2002, p. 18) hold that “short forms are not usually represented in written Arabic, although they may be indicated with diacritics” As for consonants, most Arabic consonants have equivalents in English. However, some English consonants do not exist in Arabic such as v- and p for which Arabic speakers use f and b, respectively because they are hard to produce due to the fact that they have different places of articulation. Arabic is particularly rich in uvular and pharyngealized emphatic sounds such as qaf -voiceless uvular plosive; saad-voiceless velarized alveolar fricative, which is the emphatic form of the letter s; kha- voiced uvular fricative; ghein-voiced uvular fricative; and ha voiceless pharyngeal fricative, to mention a few of them. In addition to that, Arabic has three distinct sounds that do not exist in English: ein-a nasal alveolar sound; dhaad-voiced alveolar velarized fricative, which is the emphatic form of the letter daal (d); and Taa-, the emphatic form of taa (t).

The fact that both languages have sounds that they do not share indicates that the linguistic system is not the same. Consonants and vowels in both languages have different characteristics and stand for different linguistic facts, simply because Arabic and English belong to two different language families. Each language, therefore, uses specific terms to represent its specific linguistic facts, and thus a term expressing a particular linguistic phenomenon in English may not conceptually match the content it represents in Arabic. Ermers (1990, p. 6) notes that “Arab linguists have established their linguistic theory based on characteristics of Arabic itself and that the Arabic model is indigenous.” The Arabic linguistic terminology, he notes, developed within a conceptual framework, which reflects Arabic linguistic characteristics that are independent of the English linguistic framework. The aim of this paper is therefore to show that the Arabic concepts *harf sakin* (still letter) and *harakat* (short and long vowels) do not match the linguistic meanings that English vowels and consonants represent in the English linguistic framework. The paper will also discuss the implications that such linguistic shortcuts/labels have for translators and other dictionary users who may be unaware of the linguistic representations of such terms in their native linguistic environment.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Well-known bilingual dictionaries like al-Mawrid, Atlas, al-Manar, and A Dictionary of Linguistics and Computation use terms such as *as haraka* (movement) and *harf sakin* (a quiescent, still letter) as equivalents for English vowels and consonants. These terms are used as lexical equivalents and their content remains unexplained since bilingual dictionaries provide equivalents that serve as shortcuts and do not provide explanations or clarifications on the background of the term in its direct linguistic environment. A dictionary user, therefore, may assume that the English terms and their Arabic presumed equivalents represent common linguistic phenomena identical in both languages.

The shortcoming in bilingual dictionaries lies in the fact that they provide equivalents at the word level, which are not translations at all. For this reason, Neubert (1992, p. 6) does not consider “equivalents as translations, but points to the translations”. The use of lexical equivalents has been a long yet unhelpful practice in bilingual dictionaries, as they give the impression that these equivalents are true translations of their English counterparts when they actually represent different conception areas in the two unrelated languages. Larson (1998, p. 169) notes that “any language spoken by people of a culture which is very different from the culture of those who speak the source language will make it difficult to find lexical equivalents”. The reason, according to Larson, relates either to the fact that “the concepts that occur in the source language are unknown or the way in which the concepts are expressed in the two languages is very different” (p. 169). Evidence of both, as we will see in the analysis and discussion section, is available. Likewise, Versteegh (1977, p. 34) contends that “Arabs have invented their own version of the linguistic terms to represent Arabic linguistic phenomena”. Consequently, the concepts used by lexicographers to represent Arabic linguistic phenomena do not capture the image of their English counterparts or convey the meanings and uses of a certain linguistic term according to modern linguistic theories. One reason for that is the fact that “languages group semantic components together in greatly different ways”, and their ways of naming and organizing reality must be unique (p. 35).

III. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on “contrastive analysis”, which involves an investigation of some distinct elements in a pair of related or non-related languages, consonants, and vowels in our case. Given the fact that the applied view of analysis concerns itself with comparing certain linguistic elements of the target culture against those of the source culture to predict areas of difficulty in learning a foreign language, one may argue that the applied view of analysis helps verify existing theoretical principles and highlight the norms that shape and define relevant concepts.

Hawkins (1986) argues that contrastive analysis is “a limiting case of typological comparison which seeks correlations of properties of some specific elements or subsystems or categories at the structural, phonological, grammatical and syntactic levels. On the other hand, Wardhaugh (1970) believes that there is no adequate procedure for comparing or contrasting various elements since linguists have no comprehensive system at their disposal that can relate the two languages on a grade scale of difficulty. He believes that they have no specific set of linguistic universals within a comprehensive linguistic theory that deals adequately with syntax and semantics, to say the least. This approach is contrary to the theoretical linguistics that inquires into the nature of languages with no regard for practical application.

With this in mind, the purpose of this article is not to study the entire subsystem or category, but to emphasize that lexical equivalents have linguistic meanings unfolded at the dictionary level. The comparative analysis provides an explanation of the problems encountered in translating consonants and vowels and makes possible a preposition of strategies for translators to make up for non-equivalence, which is one of the most vexing issues in comparative analysis. Such analysis can have implications for dictionary users and dictionary compilations. Matamala (2009), For example, recommends explanatory equivalents and meaning components to be used side by side with the lexical equivalents in bilingual dictionaries, so various senses in their respective linguistic contexts can be made available for users. This status is necessary for a more effective transfer of linguistic knowledge from and into Arabic.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A close examination of vowels and consonants and their Arabic equivalents in bilingual dictionaries indicate that the dictionaries referred to earlier provide less information, fewer examples, with little or no contextual information. They just provide lexical labels in their general sense such as *harf sakin* (a still letter) and *harakat* (movements) as equivalents for English consonants and vowels with no further information on the background of the terms or the conception areas they represent in their direct linguistic environment. As such, lexical linguistic transfer in this case will be of no use for dictionary users who opt for more semantic and pragmatic knowledge to transfer linguistic knowledge successfully. The discussion below is an attempt to unfold the linguistic phenomena that those lexical equivalents represent which do not capture the image of English vowels and consonants. Differences between English terms and their Arabic counterparts are basically shown in the linguistic facts that *harakat* and vowels represent in their native linguistic environment.

A. *Harakat and Vowels*

Bilingual dictionaries as diverse as *al-mawrid*, *Atlas*, *al-Manar* and A Dictionary of linguistics and computation use the Arabic term *harakat*, literally movements, as equivalent to English vowels. Basically, some of the linguistic facts

that the term *haraka* represents in the Arabic linguistic tradition can best be illustrated in terms of syllable structure, declension, and vowel length.

B. Syllable Structure

From a phonological point of view, the singular term *haraka* refers to both long and short vowels. The Arabic short vowels are diacritics that appear above or below consonants to fulfill certain grammatical functions and help in pronouncing the words correctly. These vowels are *fatha* (a), as in *bet*, *dumma* (u) as in 'put', and *kasra* (i) as in 'sin'. They look like hooks and dashes above and below the letters. These short vowels are not represented in written Arabic because they are not letters of the alphabet. In articulation, each vowel 'haraka' needs a supporting consonant to be realized. According to Versteegh (1977, p. 23), "the original meaning of vowel 'haraka' is syllable where a syllable is interpreted as consonant + vowel". The primary role of a vowel is thus to move the articulation from one consonant to another in a single syllable. He calls the consonant that is in motion *mutaharrick* (mobile) because it is united with a vowel that sets it in motion, which is a necessary condition for the realization of the consonant.

As for English, it is not a condition for the realization of the consonant to have a vowel associated with it, owing to the English notion of consonant clusters. Roach (2002, p. 71) notes that "English consonant clusters can go up to three consonants in a row in the onset position (e.g., *stroll*, *street*) and four consonants in the coda position (e.g., *prompts*, *texts*), pointing out that English also has intra-syllabic consonants in words such as *discrimination* and *description*". Unlike English, Arabic has no complex consonant structures and can tolerate a simple bi-consonantal structure in the coda position only during phonetic stops in a speech in words such as *harb* (war) and *darb* (striking). English is different as consonant clusters appear as starting and ending sounds in the syllable structure.

In light of Versteegh's explanation, the Arabic phoneme operates as a combination of a *harf* (letter) and a *haraka* (short vowel) where the vowel is necessary for the consonant to be realized. Therefore, the basis for the distinction between a consonant and a vowel 'haraka' is whether or not it can stand in its own right and be realized. From this perspective, a short *haraka* is not a letter, as it needs a supportive consonant to be realized.

When the consonant is prolonged in articulation, it requires no diacritics/short vowels to be associated with it for its realization. In this case, both the consonant and the vowel become fully realized in articulation and in written Arabic. The Arabic three long vowels, *waw*, *yaa*, and *i*: are actually short forms being prolonged in articulation. Only when vowels are prolonged in articulation that they become part of the alphabet i.e., letters represented in the Arabic writing system.

The major difference between Arabic *harakat* and English vowels relates to the fact that Arabic short forms (diacritics) are pronounced along with consonants. They set consonants in motion. Although English vowels function more like diacritic letters in words like *bit-bite*, *rid-ride*, it is not necessary that the diacritic letter be pronounced in conjunction with the consonant, although such a diacritic letter changes the pronunciation of the syllable and the meaning of the word by prolonging the vowel. Unfortunately, there seems to be no logical explanation for why vowels are silent in certain contexts and produced in others. This may all be due to the randomness and unpredictability of English spelling. Spencer (1996, p. 1184), contends that English has a bizarre spelling convention.

Arabic vowels, by contrast, are produced because they are essential for the realization of consonants and can totally change the meaning of a word and create new words. Without a short vowel 'haraka', it is impossible to tell, for example, whether the combination *h b b* is formed to mean seeds '*habb*' or love '*hubb*'. That is, the two little makings *a* and *u*, which are necessary for the realization of the consonant in articulation in these words, are crucial to the meaning of these two words, though not really considered letters of alphabets. Arabic vowels, as Versteegh (1977) indicates, are an aiding tool for the realization of consonants. That is, every syllable must have a vowel associated with it in articulation.

Not only are Arabic vowels or diacritics (short vowels) pronounceable, but also cause the following consonant to be absorbed into another consonant, creating thereby a doubling sound of the solar letter. The solar letters always lead to the dropping of the L letter from the definite article '*al*' in articulation and cause the doubling of the following solar letter. Ryding (2005, p. 25) explains "that in words beginning with the definite article '*al*' as in *al-dars* (the lesson), the L letter is assimilated to the following solar consonant in articulation, '*addars*'. The effect of such assimilation, according to her, causes the doubling of the consonant with a doubling sign called *shadda* (w) which appears above the sun letter. It also causes the letter L to disappear but has no effect on the meaning of the word. i.e., both *al-dars* and *addars* have the same meaning. Ryding contends that this rule of pronunciation applies to all solar consonants but does not change the meaning of the intended words.

C. Declension

From a grammatical perspective, however, Arabic short vowels serve as case indicators of words. For example, the final letter of a word may be articulated with *u* or *i* to mark the nominative, accusative, and dative cases, respectively. These parsing signs are a natural part of Arabic that make Arabic word order more flexible than that of English. English word order is relatively fixed (SVO) due to the fact that the verb occupies the central position in the sentence and the object follows the verb. This is not the case in Arabic which has more flexible word order structures that deviate from the typical order VSO (e.g., OVS, OSV, SOV, SVO, VOS). Due to the inflectional nature of Arabic, Arabic diacritic markings (short vowels) are functioning in the sense that they tell who did what to whom, regardless of the position of

words. The flexible word order is made possible because the short vowels are grammatical case markers in Arabic. They show whether a word is in the nominative, accusative, or dative position, to say the least. The absence of case markers in the script is confusing to those who do not have adequate knowledge of them. Ryding (2005, p. 25) holds “that only those with a solid grammatical background of the case ending system in Arabic are aware of the functions of the case markers”.

At another level, the Arabic vowels *harakât* can differentiate active from passive forms. Arabic has a consonantal root system which usually consists of three consonants. For example, the sequence k t b, to write, cannot be produced without vowels. If we mark the three consonants with the short vowel *fatha* a, we get an active verb *kataba* which means to write. If the vowels inserted between the consonants of the root are changed, we get new words and new meanings. However, if we lengthen the first vowel, change the second vowel to i, and remove the final vowel, we get an active participle *katib* (writer), a person who does the thing that the root means. In a similar vein, if we mark the first consonant with a short u, the second with short i, we get a passive verb *kutiba*, meaning ‘was written’. Without these little markings, it is hard to produce that combination because consonant clusters are not typical of Arabic in the onset position of the syllable structure. Practically, these small markings or short *harakât* appear also above and below the consonants to ensure the correct pronunciation of a word and improve comprehension of the Arabic script. In case these diacritics are not provided in the script, native speakers generally depend on their linguistic intuition when they read. One may note here that, for foreigners learning Arabic, it will be even much harder to read and comprehend the script without these diacritics being presented. Awde and Samano (2002, p. 18) point out that “the key to comprehending the rules of proper reading lies in studying the underlying structure of three-consonant roots which are ultimately based on patterns, and each pattern has a variety of possible connotations”.

Unlike Arabic, English generally does not apply diacritics to foreign words that still use the Latin alphabet (i.e., dots and signs above letters), simply because these diacritics are an unnatural part of the English language. However, lexicographers apply diacritics to help with English pronunciation, and probably to indicate their etymologies. At any rate, unlike in Arabic, diacritics are an unessential feature of the English language.

Depending on its role in the sentence, the ending of a word in Arabic would change to signal nominative, accusative, or genitive cases. Modified versions of the short vowels are added to the end of the words to mark these cases. Awde and Samano (2002) mention that “for each case, there are two sets of endings, one used for defined words (like ‘the book’) and another for undefined (like ‘book’ or ‘a book’) with a total of six possible endings, two each, defined and undefined, for nominative, accusative, and genitive” (p. 31). Therefore, with definite nominative, accusative, and genitive cases, the sounds u a i apply as case markers. As for indefinite nominative, accusative, and genitive cases, these sounds are modified into un an, in, respectively. While English has a syntactic indefinite article (a), Arabic tends to add short vowels to a final (n) sound to signal a lack of syntactic indefiniteness. The nominative, accusative, and genitive cases of ‘a book’, for example, are rendered into ‘*kitabun*’ *kitabān*, *kitabīn* versus definite cases of ‘the book’ (*al kitabu*, *al kitaba*, *al kitabi*). The indefinite endings can be interpreted as a doubling up of the short vowels associated with the ending to indicate that the vowel is followed by (n). This linguistic fact is called *nunation* or *tanween*, a combination of a short vowel plus n. This phenomenon does not exist in English because English can express indefiniteness syntactically while Arabic applies *nunation* to compensate for the lack of syntactic indefiniteness.

It is no wonder therefore that the word for vowel ‘*haraka*’ meaning movement indicates the case endings in Arabic. Versteegh (1977) goes even further by claiming that *harakat* should be derived from the theory of declension. He points out that “the primary motive of the Arabic grammarians was to preserve the Quran from corruption which was mostly the result of the wrong use of the case endings” (p. 24). Grammar, he maintains, was once defined as the knowledge of the movements of nouns, verbs, and particles. This shows that grammar was defined in terms of movements which came to be used as a general term for vowels.

D. Vowel Length

While the distinction in Arabic between a long *haraka* and a short *haraka* is interpreted in terms of length, it is not always the case in English. In many cases, the distinction between short and long vowels matches the name of the letter. For example, the “a” in “made” is a long A, because its pronunciation matches the name of the letter A. The ‘o’ in drone is also a long o matching the name of the letter. Short vowels, however, have unpredictable pronunciation. For example, the “a” in sad and the ‘o’ in done do not correspond to the names of the letters, and, accordingly should be considered short vowels. The fundamental problem is with the vowel classification system which is based on the letters of the alphabet. These vowels seem to be completely different vowels because their pronunciation does not match the names of the corresponding letters. They are not versions of their long vowels.

Unlike English, Arabic has long *harakât* which are the long versions of their short forms (*a u i*). They are prolonged and held for a much longer duration. Ryding (2005, p. 26) holds that “the difference between a long and a short vowel is not a difference in vowel quality but in the length of time that the vowel is held, indicating that the long vowels are held approximately double the length of time of the short ones”.

English, by comparison, does not rely on length to distinguish short vowels from long ones. Spencer (1996, p. 67) notes that “no vowel sound is fixed and that the distinction between short and long vowels is more than mere length, indicating that a vowel is slightly longer before a voiced obstruent”. He considers ‘bead’ longer in pronunciation than ‘beat’ because the unvoiced consonant at the end of ‘beat’ makes the duration of the vowel sound slightly shorter than

in bead. In other words, the vowel length is affected by consonants following it while the duration of a vowel sound in Arabic is not.

One basic characteristic of English vowels is that they are sonorant audible. This quality seems to be well connected to the concept of 'vowel'. In contrast, Arabic *harakât* refers to the movement of the speech organs, not necessarily to the output of the motion. Haywood (1965, p. 35) calls Arabic long *harakât- alif, yaa, and waw (huruf sâkinah)* (letters that cannot be prolonged in articulation any further) because "they issue from the abdomen and have no point of articulation other than that." Because these vowels are held in articulation as far as the breath allows without gliding up or down to new positions, they are called *huruf sâkinah* (still letters). The duration of a vowel sound is not affected by whether the consonant following it is voiced or voiceless as is the case in English. As the long *harakat* (vowels) are produced and have no point of articulation, they are considered voiced sounds. The distinction between voiced and voiceless sounds is based on the point and manner of articulation. Haywood (1965) states "any sound whose articulation involves the speech organs, namely the throat, tongue, or uvula is considered "voiceless" *sâmit*, whereas in case these speech organs are not involved, the sounds produced are called "voiced" (p. 34).

In their general sense, *huruf sâkinah* and " *sâmitah* denote anything that is silent or quiet. In their linguistic discourse, the two refer to specific linguistic facts unaccounted for by lingual dictionaries, as explained above. The absence of such facts may be confusing to dictionary users lacking adequate linguistic knowledge. A dictionary user, for example, may assume that *harf samit* (voiceless) is equivalent to the English 'silent letter', simply because *sâmit*, in its general sense, refers to quietness and stillness. Linguistically, a 'silent letter' denotes any letter that is unpronounced in English while *harf samit* refers to a voiceless sound whose production involves some speech organs. While the point and manner of the articulation determine whether the sound is voiced or voiceless, the Arabic long vowels are voiced and have no point of articulation other than the abdomen as noted by Haywood. This explains that long vowels '*harakat*' are perceived in terms of the movement of the speech organs, not in terms of voice as indicated in English. Therefore, what is referred to as a vowel in English is called *haraka* (motion) in Arabic, which is clearly linked to the movement of the speech organs, not necessarily to the outcome of the movement of the articulators.

V. HARF SÂKIN AND CONSONANT

According to Versteegh (1977), Arabic linguists perceived the sounds of Arabic as *huruf* (letters). These *huruf* become consonants when they are set in motion by a *haraka* (motion). However, the Arab linguists call consonants set in motion with long *harakat* (long vowels) '*huruf mamdudah or sâkina*' (prolonged letters or still letters), because they are held for a much longer duration in articulation without any shift to new positions. Thus, a *haraka* (vowel) could be a small diacritic that enables a consonant to move to another letter in articulation or a long vowel that allows the letter to be held as long as the tongue sustains its position in the production of that vowel in a syllable, as in *rude*. Since a long vowel is held for a much longer duration for as long as the breath allows, it is perceived by Arab linguists as a still sound that cannot be stretched any further. The use of a 'still letter' actually refers to consonants connected to long vowels, not short ones.

Lack of motion (stillness), however, is not only expressed in terms of long *harakat*. Awde and Samano (2002, p. 66) call "a letter that has no vowel a 'still letter' because it is the vowel that sets it in motion". When no vowel follows a consonant, "a sign called *sukun* looks like a small circle written above that consonant indicating the absence of vowels" (p. 28). For example, with definite nouns where the definite article 'al' is attached to a noun, the small circle of *sukun* appears on the L when followed by a lunar letter as in *al Qamar* (the moon) where q is a moon letter that keeps the letter L in articulation. The letter L nevertheless disappears altogether in articulation along with the small sign of *sukun* if the following letter is a sun letter such as 'd' in '*addar*' (the house) where the d letter is doubled because the L letter is assimilated into it in articulation. Under no circumstances, however, can the definite article 'al' be dispensed with in Written Arabic '*al-dar*'.

One may conclude that any consonant that is not associated with a vowel in articulation is marked with a *sukun*. This phenomenon is similar to the phonetic pause in English, during which the sound channel is blocked so that all airflow ceases to pass. Apparently, a *sukun* (pause) is the opposite of *haraka* (motion) and is an indication that it is preceded by a *haraka*, simply because two identical single consonants are not allowed to occur in a row in Arabic with no intervening vowels. To facilitate the pronunciation of identical adjacent letters, Ryding (2005, p. 21) indicates that "Arabic uses the *shadda*, a diacritical symbol written like 'w' above the doubled consonant and is written twice the emphasis". In the gemination process, Ryding explains that the first consonant is marked with a *sukun*, but the second one is followed by a vowel to facilitate articulation. To clarify, the verb '*kassara*', meaning to shatter into pieces, is written with one 's' and a *shadda* 'w' above the letter to move the voice from one consonant to another in a single syllable. This is not the case in English, for example, the consonant letter in dinner versus diner is doubled to modify the preceding short vowel sound whereas the long vowel in diner causes no doubling. Put differently, long vowels tend not to double the following consonant whereas short single consonants do.

While doubling consonants in English requires no intervening vowels in single syllables for their realization, Arabic requires the consonant in the second position to be followed by a *haraka* (vowel) to help move the voice from one consonant to another in a single syllable. Otherwise, it is impossible to double two consecutive monosyllabics in Arabic. On the other hand, English does not require the second consonant to be followed by a vowel for doubling to occur as

English allows consonant clusters with no intervening vowels in single syllables. In a nutshell, it is the shadda that allows doubling to occur in articulation in Arabic whereas English does not require the sound to be doubled for doubled identical letters. One can easily recall, for instance, that the word happy makes a /p/ sound, and sounds the same as hapy.

As far as syllabic structures are concerned, “Arabic does not allow consonant clusters in the onset position as every sound needs a haraka to move the articulation to the next sound in a word” (Ryding, 2005, p. 26). A syllable therefore always needs an onset (a consonant followed by a vowel) to ease pronunciation. “If the consonant on the onset position is not followed by a vowel as in the case of the loanword stabraq (brocade), Arabic requires an epenthetic glottal stop to be inserted to ease the pronunciation of the consonant cluster” Gadoua (2000, p. 60). The Arabic glottal stop, he maintains, is produced at the glottis and is used to compensate for the absence of the short haraka. As such, that foreign word is produced with a *sukun* on top of the letter /s/, and the preceding consonant is given *kasara* /i/ to produce istabraq with a *sukun* on the letter /s/ as an indication that the consonant to which it is attached is not followed by a vowel. The glottal stop is common in loanwords and is used to ameliorate the difficulty of pronunciation.

It should be noted here that the glottis in Arabic is a separate consonant sound that English speakers may find difficult to hear because it is not a phoneme in English. Although it is a consonant, it can very rarely stand on its own. Awde and Samano (2002, p. 29) explain that “it is often written riding on another letter. The letter can be alif (ا), *waaw* (و) or *yaa* (ي). The rules that determine which letter the glottis, *hamza* (ء) must ride on are very complicated, in fact, that most Arabs never learned them all”.

It is clear so far that *harf sakin* represents several linguistic realities in the Arabic way of thinking that bilingual dictionaries failed to address. At one level, *harf sakin* denotes consonants that are in motion, namely those associated with long vowels; or those marked with a *sukun*. In the latter case, the lack of motion stands for the absence of a vowel (phonetic pause) where a *sukun* appears above the consonant as an indication that the consonant is not followed by a vowel. If the consonant with a *sukun* is followed by a vowel, it must be doubled with a *shadda* (ّ) written above that letter.

The very use of *harf sakin* as equivalent for the English consonant does not illustrate the linguistic meanings that the Arabs had in mind. What is required of these dictionaries is presenting linguistic contextualized uses of that term to highlight what it stands for in Arabic linguistic thinking. Contextualization also helps in distinguishing between *harf sakin* and *harf samit*. Reflecting on this, Haywood (1965, p. 51) mentions that “*harf samit* is not a silent letter, but denotes a voiceless sound where voiceless does not mean that there is utter silence or quietness.” He holds that *samit* (voiceless, whispered) does not mean that the sound is not loud enough or somehow suppressed.

There is no escape from admitting that the meaning of English consonants and vowels is obvious not because they are well defined, but of what they refer to. English consonants and vowels are used only in their linguistic discourse. Arabic sounds by contrast refer to *huruf* (letters). The reference to the letter is just one of its meanings and not the most fundamental. According to Lane (1863, p. 549), “*harf*” refers to deviation, hardship, fine edge, nib, and the extensions that come with these. Hirfa, for example, would be simply one’s profession”. One can derive so many words from the basic trilateral root *h r f* to refer to various things, not necessarily related to linguistics. According to Versteegh (1977, p. 47), “Sibawayh, a great Arabic grammarian, uses *harf* to mean a word, phrase, a combination of words”. On the other hand, *harf* seemingly denotes things that are *harf*- like. Al-Masri (2003) mentions that a lean, graceful camel is likened to the Arabic *harf*, namely *harf alif* (ا) to suggest strength and vitality. He also indicates that the Arabs were accustomed to likening the sword blade or point of the sword to *harf alif* to suggest sharpness.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The foregoing discussion shows that English vowels and consonants do not capture the image of *haraka* and *harf sakin* in Arabic linguistic thinking. *Haraka* is basically an aiding tool for the realization of consonants, whereas a vowel is not a necessary tool for the realization of consonants in English. So, what is referred to as a vowel in English is referred to by the Arab linguists as *haraka*. Basically, *haraka* represents short and long vowels where the distinction between the two has to do with length. As for English, the distinction between long and short vowels does not always match the name of the corresponding letter, simply because long and short vowels have unpredictable pronunciations.

While vowels and consonants are letters of the alphabet in English, short *harakat* or diacritics are not letters of the alphabet in Arabic because they cannot stand on their own without having a consonant associated with them. This is due to the fact that consonant clusters cannot begin words in Arabic, whereas English allows consonant clusters to begin and end words.

Another point to highlight is the fact that vowels have to do with the voice in English whereas the notion of *harakat* in Arabic is expressed in terms of the movement of speech organs. That is, when the short vowels are prolonged in articulation, no speech organ is involved in their production since they issue from the abdomen which is the only point of their articulation as Haywood explained earlier.

The conception of vowels and consonants, therefore, is not the same in both languages. In Arabic, they express linguistic phenomena such as the linguistic notion of *sukun* (stillness), *tashdid* (doubling sounds), and nunation (adding a vowel to a final (n) sound). Although the first two phenomena have somehow similar functions in English, they do not express the same linguistic realities. The latter (nunation) does not exist in English at all. Reflecting on this, Versteegh (1977, p. 34) contends that “Arabs have invented their own version of the linguistic terms to represent Arabic linguistic

phenomena". Given the cultural and linguistic remoteness of Arabic, it was plausible to demonstrate that Arabic linguistic phenomena do not capture the conceptual meanings of their English counterparts or convey the meanings or uses of a certain linguistic term according to modern linguistic theories.

Finally, consonants and vowels are only used in their linguistic discourse whereas Arabic terms have linguistic and non-linguistic references. The linguistic context is just one reference and not the most fundamental. Since Arabic and English are two unrelated languages, they are likely to label and organize the linguistic realities in completely different ways.

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSLATORS AND DICTIONARY USERS

It is quite obvious that the Arabic lexical items used as equivalents in the above-mentioned dictionaries are by no means exact correspondences to their English counterparts. They are only sense indicators as the totality of the conceptual meaning of the item is not provided in the dictionaries. Although the dictionaries referred to earlier are indispensable tools for students, researchers, and translators, they do not adequately satisfy the needs of each group of users. Generally, they are considered handy dictionaries available in the market which can only reinforce unfortunate translations of concepts like, in our case, consonants and vowels. Therefore, users of such bilingual dictionaries should not be complacently content with the Arabic shortcuts as equivalents for their English counterparts. These equivalents are just shortcuts in bilingual dictionaries and conceal the conceptual linguistic facts they represent in the Arabic linguistic tradition.

What is required of dictionary makers is much more than compiling lexical equivalents, which are by no means true translations. Nelson (1978, p. 213) urges lexicographers "to think contextually, rather than one-to-one translations because such equivalents can be of limited use" Therefore, an extensive range of information accompanied by examples of the essential features of these concepts and their applications in various contexts is needed. These examples may mirror a great deal of linguistic and grammatical behavior that translators and scholars can find helpful in transferring linguistic knowledge as well as linguistic terms adequately. Given the cultural remoteness of Arabic, it would be necessary, not only to come up with a lexical equivalent at the word level for designating an English term but also a way to further identify the specific linguistic properties of the Arabic terms as opposed to their English counterparts. This explanation will provide an opportunity for the translator to make a modification of some kind to the term chosen to approximate the meaning of the source text term, or even combine terms in certain ways to communicate the meaning. After all, the ability to understand, connect, and combine seemingly unrelated concepts is a manifestation of translational activity.

Bilingual lexicographers therefore must be experts with extensive knowledge in the field to be able to capture the various meaning components that are not obvious to dictionary users so that a full range of meaning is provided for them. However, given that compilation for each group of users is almost impossible to the large investment of human and economic resources, it would be tempting for dictionary users to consult specialized monolingual dictionaries which can help translators in obviating equivalent terms and applying instead descriptive paraphrases, illustrative examples, and adequate explanation for better communicative meanings. After all, the translator's communicative competence is indispensable because such bilingual dictionaries do not contain sufficient information for users.

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