

Tikrit University
College of Education for Humanities
English Department



Fourth Stage/ Translation
Translation of WORD ORDER
Dr. Ashwaq J. Mohammed
2026- 2025

Translation of WORD ORDER

The normal order of the words of the Arabic sentence is sometimes different from that of the English sentence whose normal order is as follows: subject-verb-object/complement. In Arabic, however, the normal word order is two types:

1. Nominal word order: Topic and comment/subject and predicate (مبتدأ وخبر): Two nouns, a noun and an adjective, or a noun and a verb when the noun is emphasised.
2. Verbal word order: Verb-subject-object/complement. ('2' is more frequent than '1').

Problem 1: The reservation of the English word order:

The English word order is usually translated literally: N-V-O/C into Arabic, regardless of its normal word order, which is possible, but not advisable as a rule unless the noun is emphasised. In the following examples, the word order is normal, and the English subject is not emphasised. Therefore, translating them into English word order in Arabic is not justified:

1. “The diplomat left Damascus for London”: (الدبلوماسي غادر دمشق الى لندن)
2. “The sky became cloudy”: (السماء تلبدت بالغيوم)
3. “The pupils enjoyed their holiday”: (التلاميذ استمتعوا باجازتهم \بعطلتهم)

Solution: The change into normal Arabic word order:

In normal cases, the English word order is replaced by the more frequent and normal Arabic word order of: verb–subject-object/complement. The examples can, therefore, be retranslated as follows:

1. “The diplomat left Damascus for London”: غادر الدبلوماسي دمشق الى لندن
2. “The sky was cloudy” تلبدت السماء بالغيوم
3. “The pupils enjoyed their holiday”: استمتع التلاميذ بعطلتهم

where the verb is first, followed by the subject and then the object(1), or the complement(2&3).

Problem 2: Similarity of the word order of English and Arabic:

There is one type of word order in Arabic which is identical with the English word order: subject-verb-object/complement. However, in Arabic it is a nominal rather than a verbal word order, because the subject becomes a topic and the verb functions as a comment. The problem with this similarity is that students mostly translate English into this identical word order in Arabic, regardless of the more normal nominal and verbal word orders discussed above. This is due to the possibility of translating word for word into Arabic. In other words, this word order of a noun and a verb becomes the rule for the students.

Solution: Identical SL&TL word order is the exception:

As a matter of fact, this identical English-Arabic word order is the exception, not the rule. It is used when greater emphasis than usual is intended to be put on the subject. To understand this, we may compare the part of the verse of the Holy Quran (الله يتوفى الانفس) (where the subject الله is unusually first for more emphasis, for Allah the Almighty only can take the souls, followed by the verb (يتوفى)

to the more normal version, (يتوفى الله الانفس) (i.e. the verb (يتوفى) is prior to the subject (الله)). Understanding the difference between the original verse and the hypothetical version makes the point clearer, I hope. At all events, such Arabic word order is not wrong, nor meaning is affected considerably. There is a possibility that the students may always follow the same English word order, ignoring in effect the other types of word order available in Arabic grammar, especially the more frequent verb-subject order. In the following examples, the first word receives special emphasis in both languages:

1. "God likes us": الله يحبنا
2. "The zionist police kill children": الشرطه الصهيونيه تقتل الاطفال
3. "The earthquake took place yesterday": الزلزال حدث امس

However, we cannot always translate in this word order in Arabic because we do not emphasise everything in translation. On the contrary, emphasis is the exception, not the rule. Therefore, it is not advisable to translate the following English examples with an identical Arabic word order, as follows:

1. "Mary fell ill last week": ماري مرضت الاسبوع الماضي
2. "My brother always comes back home late": اخي دائما يعود الى البيت متاخرا
3. "Today looks nice": اليوم يبدو جميلا

Rather, we would translate them more normally into:

1. "Mary fell ill last week": مرضت ماري الاسبوع الماضي
2. "My brother always comes back home late": يعود اخي الى البيت متأخرا دائما
3. "Today looks nice": يبدو اليوم جميلا

Problem 3: Unified, flexible TL word order: (إن) sentence:

In Arabic, there is one type of sentence where both the English and Arabic word orders meet, that is, the 'inna' (إن) sentence. It is a sentence headed by (إن) (that, on the one hand, retains the English subject-verb word order, with an acceptable Arabic word order in effect. So all we do is put 'inna' at the beginning of the English sentence, with no change of word order. Here are paired examples with two equally acceptable versions of translation, the first of which is more emphasised than the second:

1. "Hypocrites live a miserable life" (cf.) ان المنافقين يحيون حياة تعسة
..... حياة
2. "Ladies hide the truth about their age": تخفي (cf.) ان السيدات يخفين حقيقة سنهن
...السيدات
3. "Her father suffers from asthma": يعاني ابوها من الربو (cf.) ان اباهما يعاني من الربو

This type of sentence and word order is frequent in Arabic. However, it should not be overused at the expense of the frequent nominal sentences and the more frequent verbal sentences. On the other hand, (إن) is emphatic and,

hence, would rather be used with care. In any case, these three possible types reflect the flexibility of Arabic word order, in comparison to the single, inflexible English word order.

Problem 4: Imperative statements are an exception:

Imperative sentences are an exception in the word order of English and Arabic. Both have an identical word order of imperatives;

Solution: Word-for-word translation of word order (metaphorical statements are not included):

The literal, word-for-word translation of the English word order of the imperative into Arabic is feasible: e. g.

1. “Stay where you are”: ابق حيث انت
2. “Be patient”: كن صبورا (صابرا) \ اصبر \ تحل بالصبر
3. “Listen to me carefully”: اسمعني (اصغ الي) جيدا
4. “Beware of the dog”: احترس من الكلب
5. “Hold your tongue”: امسك (عليك) لسانك \ اصمت
6. “Meet your promises”: ف (\ اوف) بوعدك
7. “Don’t believe him”: لا تصدقه
8. “Do not backbite your friends”: لا تغتب اصدقاءك