

An Investigation of English and Arabic Verb Structures: A Contrastive Corpus-based Study of Instrumentals and Objectives as Subject

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Abstract

The study aims to investigate the effect of negative transfer when native Arabic speakers use English ergative¹ verbs with objectives² and instrumentals³ as subject. Using corpora and corpus linguistics tools, 50 ergative verbs are compared to their Arabic translations to check if these verbs allow for using instrumentals and objectives as subject. A learner corpus made of essays produced by 220 learners of English as a foreign language is compiled to check how these verbs are used by

¹ Ergative verbs are verbs that can be used transitively and intransitively where the object of the verb when used transitively becomes the subject when used intransitively as in “Sam opened the door” and “The door opened.”

² Instrumentals are one of the noun cases named by Fillmore in Case Grammar Theory. They are the tools used to carry out an action such as the noun key in “The key opened the door” or nouns that acts as stimuli for psychological events.

³ Objective (O), the semantically most neutral case, the case of anything representable by a noun whose role in the action or state identified by the verb is identified by the semantic interpretation of the verb itself; conceivably the concept should be limited to things which are affected by the action or state identified by the verb (...). The term is not to be confused with the notion of direct object, nor with the name of the surface case synonymous with accusative. (Fillmore, 1968, p. 46)

Fillmore mentioned that the term is not to be confused with the direct object. To clarify this, here are some examples.

The noun door in “Sam opened the door” is an objective case, but the noun house in “Sam built a house” is the product or factitive as Fillmore names it, and Pam in “Sam helped Pam” is the one who benefited from the action so Pam is the beneficiary.

the learners. A form containing sentences with ergative verbs with different noun cases as subject is sent to students to check if learners consider verbs used ergatively as correct. The study revealed that there is negative transfer when it comes to using instrumentals and objectives as subject due to the fact that the form of the English verbs does not change when used transitively and intransitively. Moreover, learners consider most of the sentences used ergatively as incorrect.

Keywords: Case Grammar Theory – corpus – corpus linguistics tools - ergative verb - instrumental – objective

1. Introduction

Helping users of a new language construct proper sentences and be aware of different patterns determines focusing on the semantic and syntactic valence of verbs. What helps in this aspect is referring to Fillmore's (1968) Case Grammar Theory which is a system that focuses on the link between the verb and the number of cases a verb takes. Fillmore's theory revolves around adding a third semantic layer to nouns. Let us consider the following sentences: (1) Sam played football. (2) Sam slept. (3). Sam felt sad. Taking the subject/predicate dichotomy, Sam is the subject in the three sentences, and this is the first layer. Sam is a proper noun, and this is the second layer. The third layer Fillmore suggested adding is related to the role of Sam which is completely different in each of the three sentences. In sentence 1, Sam initiated the action of kicking the ball, so he is the agentive. In sentence 2, Sam is simply a patient as he did not initiate any action, and in sentence 3, Sam is an experiencer.

Fillmore (1970) is one of the main researchers who conducted some studies dealing with semantic and syntactic valence of verbs. Fillmore distinguished between two kinds of transitive verbs. The first one is the surface contact verbs such as hit, strike, and bump. The second one is the verbs that lead to a change in state such as break, shatter, and crack. The differences between the two types of verbs are determined based on syntactic tests alternations. Fillmore proved that each group of verbs shares semantic and syntactic properties that determine different noun cases. The first test that differentiates the hitting verbs from those of breaking is the "causative alternation" which is possible with the breaking verbs only. (4) Sam broke the glass. (5) The glass broke. (6) Sam hit the glass. (7) * The glass hit. Sentence 7 is incorrect because when noun cases are taken into consideration, the verb hit cannot have the objective as a subject unlike the verb break. Another test is the "possessor ascension" where a body part of the owner can be a direct object. Let us examine these sentences. (8). Sam hit Pam's leg. (9). Sam hit Pam on the leg. (10). Sam broke Pam's leg. (11). *Sam broke Pam on the leg. The adjectival-stative test, which works with the breaking verbs only, is the third one. (12) The door is still broken. (13) *The door is still hit. Levin (1993) also distinguished between two kinds of transitive verbs. She was interested in the conative alternation. The conative alternation, according to Levin, is possible with contact and motion verbs. Hitting verbs, unlike breaking verbs, allow for conative alternation. Consider the following examples: (14) Sam hit the wall. (15) Sam hit at the wall. (16) Sam broke the wall. (17) *Sam broke at the wall. The hitting verbs are verbs of motion that include contact, and that is why such alternation is allowed in sentence 15. The breaking verbs, on the other hand, are verbs of change of state which

do not have an inherent notion of contact, and that is why the conative alternation is not allowed with the verb break. Hassan (2015) took Fillmore's work as a starting point to work on the equivalent verbs to hitting and breaking in Arabic. Hassan pointed to the importance of distinguishing between the tests used for Arabic and English verbs. The main reason for this distinction is that Modern Standard Arabic, unlike English, is rich morphologically. The base root of a verb is usually made of three to five letters. For example, the verb كسر is made of three letters, and inflected forms of the verb are formed by adding gender, number, and tense affixes. For her study, Hassan used the causative- inchoative alternation. Taking the verbs ضرب and كسر into consideration, Hassan mentioned that the verbs of breaking allow for both the inchoative and causative forms by adding a morpheme to the inchoative. (18) انكسرت النافذة (19) .كسر الولد النافذة (20). On the other hand, the hitting verbs do not allow for the inchoative form but allow for the causative form. Sentences 20 and 21 show the difference. (20) انضربت المرأة* (21) .ضرب الولد المرأة. The second test Hassan used is the irreversibility of the action. The breaking verbs "entail a nonreversible result" (p.187), unlike the hitting verbs. Hassan used the following examples to support her argument. (22) مزق زيد ثيابه في المظاهرة (23) . دق زيد الباب بالمطرقة. The action carried out in sentence 22 is irreversible. The clothes that have been torn during the demonstration cannot go back to the original form, but knocking the door with the hammer does not entail that the door has been ruined. As for negative transfer, the researcher could not find previous studies dealing with negative transfer when it comes to using instrumentals and objectives as subject, but the researcher found a number of studies showing the effect of negative transfer. For his study, Mahmoud (2002) collected data from a number of paragraphs and essays produced by native Arabic second- year university students majoring in English. Mahmoud collected 124 idioms used in the paragraphs and essays used for the study. 66 of these idioms had incorrect usage of articles and prepositions such as "the eye by the eye" and "the silence is from gold" (p. 3). In some cases, the same words are used in Arabic and English to express either similar or different meanings. In this case, transfer leads to constructing grammatically correct sentences but semantically incorrect. 12 idioms were grammatically correct but failed to capture the meaning intended by students as "pull one's leg" (p. 4) which has different meanings when the two languages are taken into consideration. In English, the idiom is used jokingly and means saying something that is untrue. In Arabic, it means to let someone talk. 21 idioms were translated from Arabic such as "he paid in spite of his nose" (p. 4). Sabbah's (2015) study was carried out to show kinds of errors produced by Arabic learners of English. His study revealed using incorrect articles and prepositions, adding s to non-count nouns, placing adverbs and adjectives incorrectly, in addition to other errors. Sabbah supported his claim by using a number of examples that show that such errors are due to interlingual transfer. Bardovi and Sprouse (2018) mentioned the effect of negative transfer on proper pronunciation. Bardovi-harlig and Sprouse (2018) carried out a study to prove that negative transfer has an inhibitory effect on mastering a new language. In their study, they explored the negative effect mother tongue has on acquiring a second language. They did not focus on one aspect or two languages in particular. According to them "Negative transfer manifests itself in different linguistic domains" (p. 1). For example, negative transfer leads to errors in word order. They mentioned how French speakers learning English find difficulty placing adverbs in their proper places. In the area of phonology,

negative transfer has a great effect on accent. They supported their argument by pointing out to the difficulty of pronouncing /p/ by most Arabic learners. They concluded their study by the necessity of benefitting from contrastive linguistics when creating syllabi for learners. Alghamdi (2019) depended on a number of previous studies to shed “light on the inter-lingual transfer of Arabic into English writings of Arab EFL learners that happens while learning English as a foreign language” (p. 16). Using connecting words is one of the areas Arab EFL learners have difficulty in mastering. Some learners write sentences like “I spent a very hard day and a very hard feeling and I couldn’t sleep that night” (p. 24). When Arabic EFL learners construct complex sentences, they do have a lot of errors since the structure of some English complex sentences is different when compared to Arabic. For example, sentences like “I hope it will be very interesting the programme” (p. 24) can be seen a lot. Using nouns and pronouns is another problematic area. The reason behind this is that in English, living things are either masculine or feminine, and objects are neutral. This is not the case in Arabic where all nouns and pronouns are either masculine or feminine. Also, Arabic nouns and pronouns are either singular, dual, or plural. This difference leads to adding s to all plural nouns by most Arabic EFL learners. It is common to read words like furnitures, informtions, and homeworks. The difference in word order between English and Arabic is another problem faced by Arabic EFL learners. Adjectives usually precede nouns in English and come after nouns in Arabic. Alghamdi concluded that her study may “help the teachers of foreign language to be become familiar with the concept of inter-language” (p. 26) and reminded that such errors are not “evils to be eradicated” (p.26) – rather they are part of the learning process. Thyab (2020) analyzed previous studies regarding the negative transfer that Arabic speaking students face when learning English. She focused on prepositions and determiners. Thyab pointed out that Arabic learners of English find difficulty when using definite, indefinite, or zero articles. The problem arises because in Arabic, there is no indefinite article. For example, the article “an” that is used before nouns like apple and orange has no equivalence in Arabic. An apple is equivalent to تفاحة. As for prepositions, the problem arises because in English, prepositions are used in different places. “Prepositions may be placed in front of nouns (on Thursday), before gerund verbs (for speaking), as part of a phrasal verb (put up with) or after adjectives (interested in)” (p. 3). Thyab added that since there are no specific rules explaining the use of prepositions, Arabic learners have a lot of errors when prepositions are taken into consideration. Zaidi’s (2022) study highlighted “writing errors which consist of grammatical, syntactic, semantic and lexical errors committed by Arab EFL students in their written production because the inter-lingual transfer of Arabic into English” (p. 15). Zaidi’s study took the following into consideration: nouns, pronouns, prepositions, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, and conjunctions. Zaidi mentioned that negative transfer leads to a number of errors. The differences between English and Arabic result in faulty sentences when Arabic native speakers learn English. For example, they add s to non-count nouns and use pronouns and prepositions incorrectly. Also, when constructing sentences with modifiers, they tend to misplace them. Moreover, conjunctions are not properly used in most of the cases.

The above researchers focused on the importance of taking the semantic-syntactic valence into consideration. Fillmore, focused on the necessity of labelling the noun cases related to each verb class based on their semantic roles. Most of the researchers (Fillmore 1970; Levin, 1993) focused

on one language. Hassan (2015), focused only on the hitting and breaking verbs. None of the above-mentioned studies contrasted a variety of verbs in English and Arabic. That is why, contrasting how noun cases are used with a number of English verbs and their translations in Arabic is a must. Such a study paves the way for others to work on more verbs.

2. Methodology

2.1 Design

The study is a contrastive corpus-based study which aims at investigating the use of instrumentals and objectives as subject with the 50 most frequently used ergative English verbs and their translations in Arabic. Quantitative analysis is performed to measure the degree of negative transfer between English and Arabic when it comes to using instrumentals and objectives as subject.

2.2 Participants

The participants of the study are 220 secondary students studying EFL in Lebanon.

2.3 Instruments/ Tools

The researcher uses a variety of tools specialized for corpus linguistic analysis such as CPQweb which is powered by Lancaster University, TagAnt, Antconc, LancsBox, and Sketch Engine to check if the verbs of the study allow for using instrumentals and objectives as subject. Also, the researcher compiles a learner corpus using TagAnt and Antconc to check how the participants of the study use the verbs of the study. Furthermore, to validate the assumption that native Arabic speakers using English do not usually regard sentences with objectives and instrumentals as correct, the researcher makes use of Google Forms and sends 24 correct sentences including eight ergative verbs with different cases as subject to check if learners consider these sentences correct.

2.4 Procedure

A list of all ergative verbs is obtained from Sinclair's (1990) *Collins Cobuild English Grammar* and Bryan's (2016) *Garner's Modern English Usage*. The first 50 most frequently used ergative verbs in Open National American Corpus (ONAC) are used for the study. Table 1 lists these verbs and their Arabic translations. After obtaining the 50 ergative verbs, 12 corpora from Sketch Engine, CPQWeb powered by Lancaster University, and Lancsbox are used to check if the verbs of the study allow for using instrumentals or objectives as subject. Also, the researcher builds a learner corpus to check if Arabic learners of English use instrumentals and objectives as subject with verbs in English that allow using instrumentals and objectives as subject. Writings with highly erroneous sentence structure and/or word usage are excluded. Writings that do not meet the standards of the Common European Framework of Reference for Language is not included in the corpus. All the writings are typed and saved as plain text and then tagged using TagAnt 1.2.0. which allows running statistical analysis using corpus linguistics tools. Below is a piece of writing taken from the learner corpus and tagged using TagAnt 1.2.0.

Death_NN penalty_NN is_VBZ the_DT number_NN one_CD killer_NN of_IN killers_NNS

Then, using AntConc and typing the name of the verb, such as finish, in the search box as follows: finish*_V*, all the hits where finish is used as a verb are displayed, and the type of noun cases used as subject is plotted by the researcher. Finally, the researcher uses Google Forms to send a survey to the participants of the study. The following ergative verbs are used in three sentences each: boil, change, clean, click, cook, connect, open, and shatter. Each verb is used in three correct sentences that have different noun cases as subject. One of the sentences has an agentive as subject such as “Sam boiled the egg.” Sam here is the agentive who initiated the act of boiling the egg. In another sentence, the verb is used in the passive form, and in the third sentence the verb is used ergatively such as “The egg boiled.” Using statistics offered by Google Forms, the researcher is able to figure out the percentage of each sentence considered as correct by the students who filled the form.

3. Findings

After obtaining the list of the 50 most frequently used ergative verbs, the researcher used a number of English and Arabic corpora found in Sketch Engine, CPQweb, and Lancsbox to find sentences with objectives and instrumentals as subject with the English ergative verbs and their translations. The search revealed that all the 50 English verbs and 49 Arabic verbs allow for using objectives as subject, and 47 English verbs and 25 Arabic verbs allow for using instrumentals as subject. The Arabic sentences obtained showed that the VSO pattern is more frequently used than SVO pattern. It is well-known that Arabic has the two patterns, but English has only one pattern: SVO. This, coupled with the fact that the form of the Arabic verb changes with almost all the verbs when changed from transitive to intransitive, leads to confusion when native Arabic speakers using English are faced with sentences that start with the objective case where the form of the verb does not change. For example, the verb open does not change syntactically when used transitively and intransitively as in the sentences “Sam opened the door” and “The door opened.” This is not the case with Arabic where almost all the verbs change their forms when used intransitively as in the verb فتح which is the translation of the verb open. By observing the form of the verb when used transitively فتح سام الباب and intransitively الباب انفتح, it is evident that there is a change in the form of the verb.

As for the survey sent to secondary students, only 214 students filled the first part of the survey. They ticked the class they are in and whether they are males or females. 5 of those students did not complete the second part which is ticking the sentences they believe are correct. Responses 149, 170, 181, 183, and 193 did not have any sentences ticked; as a result, the number of responses for the second part is 209 and not 214. Figure 1 shows the responses given by the students who filled the form when asked to tick the sentences they believe are correct. Here are the responses for verbs when used ergatively: 38 (18.2 %) for open, 48 (23 %) for shatter, 27 (12.9 %) for connect, 47 (22.5 %) for boil, 18 (8.6 %) for clean, 85 (40.7 %) for change, 21 (10 %) for cook, and 21 (10 %) for click.

Out of the 50 ergative verbs used for the study, 34 verbs were used in the learner corpus. Figures 2 and 3 help visualize the results obtained from the learner corpus regarding how the learners used the verbs of the study. The number of hits of all the verbs used in the active form in the learner corpus is 481. 186 times the agentive case was used as subject. As for the objective case as subject, it was

used 121 times. There were no findings for the instrumental case as subject. 174 subjects were neither agentives nor objectives; these subjects were infinitive phrases, gerund phrases, expletive pronouns, or others. The agentive case as subject was used with 29 verbs out of the 34 verbs. The verbs fill, fire, sound, and vary were not used with agentive as subject. With 16 verbs, the objective case was used as subject. With 14 verbs, subjects as objectives and agentives were used. With the verbs connect, mark, and separate, both cases were equally used as subject. With the verbs continue, end, reduce, start, strengthen, stop, and turn, the agentive case was used more than the objective case. With the following verbs, the objective case was used more than the agentive as subject: alter, change, increase, and show.

The verb change is one the verbs found in both the learner corpus and the survey sent to secondary students. By examining the results in both and comparing them to other verbs, it is clearly evident that students used the objective case with the verb change as subject in their writings, and 40.7% considered the sentence “The conditions changed” correct. By comparing these findings to the verb clean, we got the following: only 8.6% considered clean with an objective case as subject correct, and none of the students used an objective case as subject with the verb clean in the essays gathered for the learner corpus, and by examining the nature of verbs where the objective case was used more than the agentive as subject by students in the learner corpus, it was noticed that these verbs are used in the scientific field, such as the verbs alter, change, increase, and show.

4. Discussion

The study revealed that some verbs in English and Arabic allow for using instrumentals and objects as subject while others do not. It is true that all the verbs used for the study allow using objectives as subject, and this is due to the fact that all these verbs are ergative verbs which by definition are verbs that are used transitively and intransitively, and the object of these verbs becomes the subject when the verb is used intransitively, but many other verbs that can be used transitively and intransitively are not ergative verbs, and thus the object of these verbs cannot be used as the subject when the verb is used transitively such as the verbs eat and play. The findings coincide with Fillmore’s (1970) study that distinguished between two kinds of transitive verbs which are hit and break. Each verb has different semantic and syntactic properties, and this allows for the causative alternation with break only. Also, the verb break is an ergative verb, but hit is not. The findings correlate with Hassan’s (2015) study which showed that the verbs of breaking allow for inchoative forms, unlike the verbs of hitting. Unlike Fillmore’s and Hassan’s studies that focused on two verbs, this study took into consideration 50 verbs to check if objectives and instrumentals are used as subject, and this was done by referring a number of corpora. Similar to a number of studies (Al Ghamdi, 2019; Bardovi-harlig & Mahmoud, 2002; Sabbah, 2015; Sprouse, 2018; Thyab, 2020; Zaidi, 2022), this study relied on contrastive linguistics to investigate the effect of negative transfer. In accordance with these studies, this study showed the effect of L1 on mastering L2. This study showed that the structure of sentences of both English and Arabic varies. English has the SVO pattern. It is true that Arabic has two patterns which are SVO and VSO, but most of the sentences follow the VSO pattern. Only 8 % of the sentences obtained from the Arabic corpora where the objective case is used as subject use the SVO pattern. Also, the form of the Arabic verb when used

transitively and intransitively undergoes a change, and this is another aspect leading learners to refuse certain correct structures in English. Data obtained from the form sent to secondary learners showed that only 30.11 % of sentences used ergatively are accepted by learners. This also affected the written production of learners. By analyzing data obtained from the learner corpus compiled for the study, it was shown that the verbs of the study were used in the active form 481 times. Only 121 of them were used ergatively which is 25.15 %. These findings accord with a number of studies that showed the effect of negative transfer. Mahmoud's (2002) study showed the effect of negative transfer on native Arabic second-year university students who use idioms incorrectly. Similar to Sabbah's study (2015), Alghamdi's (2019), Thyab's (2020), and Zaidi's (2022) studies revealed the effect of negative transfer. The findings of the studies that focused on the effect of negative transfer on Arabic native speakers when using English coincide with the finding of this study. Unlike all the studies that focused on negative transfer, this study is a corpus-based study; as a result, data obtained from this study can be more reliable due to the amount of data analyzed.

The study revealed that by proper introduction to patterns not available in the learner's language, the effect of negative transfer can be mitigated or even eradicated. To prove this, the researcher would focus on the findings related to the verbs change and clear to draw a comparison. The two verbs were included in the survey sent to students and in the learner corpus. By checking the use of these two verbs in the learner corpus, the following was obtained: the verb change was used 12 times with the agentive case as subject and 18 times with the objective case as subject. Clean was only used thrice with agentive as subject. As for the survey sent to secondary students, the following was obtained: 40.7 students accepted the objective case as subject with change and only 8.6 accepted the objective case as subject with clean. Data obtained revealed that learners accept and use the objective case as subject with verbs that are more frequently introduced to them. Learners used the verbs alter, change, increase, and show with the objective case as subject in their writings more than using the agentive case, and this is due to the fact that learners are familiar with sentences like: conditions altered, ice changes into water, the temperature increases, and the graph shows the increase in temperature.

5. Recommendations

Since it has been proven that by proper introduction to patterns not available in the user's language, the effect of negative transfer can be dealt with, here are some recommendations. The study recommends adding the concept of ergativity to learners at an early age to avoid fossilization and addresses book publishers to use ergative verbs in their publications and use different noun cases as subject with the verbs that allow to in order to familiarize learners with the concept that some verbs allow having different noun cases as subject. The study also draws teachers' attention to the necessity of benefiting from contrastive linguistics to be aware of the differences between the language they are teaching and the learners' mother tongue to tailor drills that can help overcome problems learners face and preferably deal with such problems before they occur since avoiding errors in the first place is much more beneficial than fixing them. Lexicographers are advised to add noun cases used as subject with each verb to verb entries, and in this case, learners can rely on dictionaries to figure out whether a certain structure is correct or not.

6. Suggestions for Further Research

The study at hand took only 50 verbs into consideration and two noun cases only, so it is suggested that more work on more verbs and different noun cases be carried out. Moreover, it is important for researchers to work on noun cases that can be used with each verb as subject to help users of a certain language figure out whether a certain pattern is correct or not. This will definitely help lexicographers as well.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study was taken to ascertain whether negative transfer acts as a barrier affecting native Arabic speakers using English to construct proper sentences using instrumentals and objectives as subject. The study revealed that negative transfer affects the ability of users of L2 to recognize well-formed patterns. It also affects their ability to construct sentences with various structures, thus affecting the quality of the language produced. The study also revealed that by proper introduction to patterns not available in L1, the effect of negative transfer can be properly dealt with. The study also showed the importance of benefiting from contrastive corpus linguistics.

8. List of Figures

Figure 1

Responses given by secondary students for the form

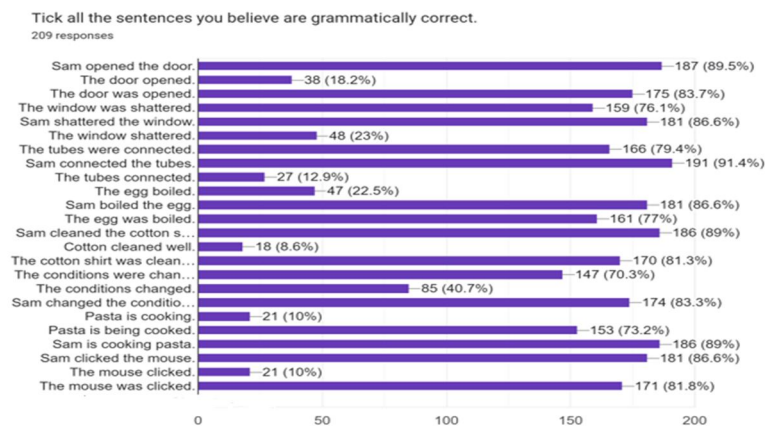
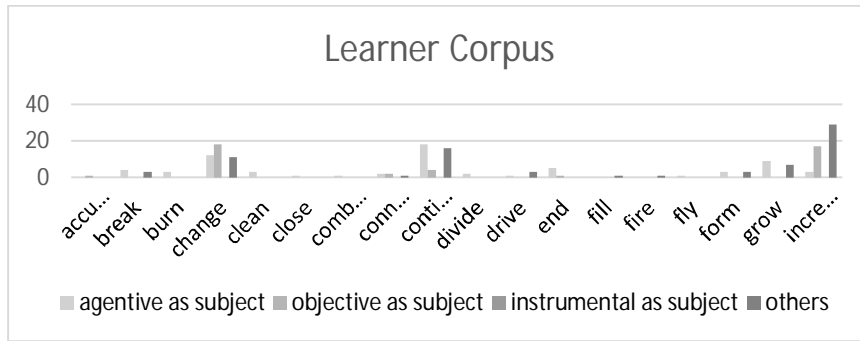
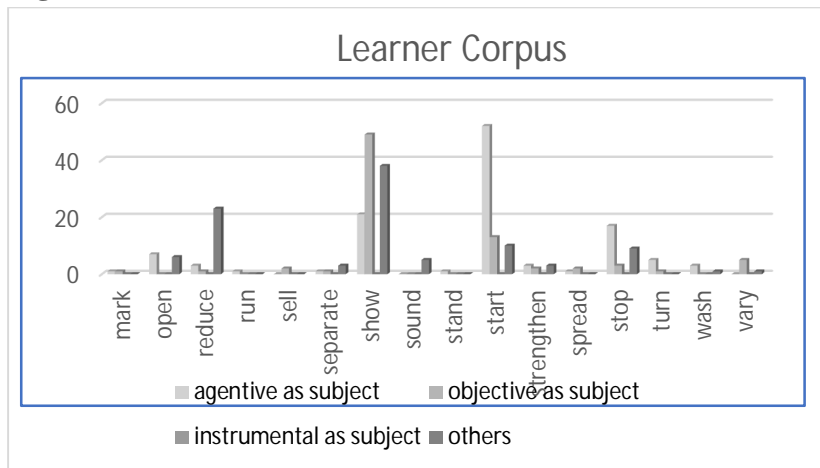


Figure 2

A bar graph showing what kind of noun cases learners used with the verbs of the study

Figure 3

A bar graph showing what kind of noun cases learners used with the verbs of the study

9. List of Tables

Table 1

A list of the most frequently used ergative verbs in ONAC and their Arabic translations

accumulate	راكم	drive	قاد	run	ركض
adjust	ضبط	drop	سقط	sell	باع
age	عتق	dry	جفف	separate	فصل
break	كسر	end	أنهى	show	عرض
burn	حرق	fill	مأ	sound	أطلق صوتا
change	غير	fire	أطلق النار	stain	طبخ
clean	نظف	fly	طار	stand	وقف
clear	مهد	form	شكل	start	بدأ
click	نقر	freeze	جمد	stick	لصق

close	غلق	grow	زرع	strengthen	نشر
combine	جمع	increase	زاد	spread	قوى
cook	طبخ	mark	وضع علامة	stop	أوقف
connect	وصل	match	طابق	transfer	حوّل
continue	واصل	open	فتح	turn	دار
coordinate	نسّق	reduce	قلّ	wash	غسل
dilute	خفف	reverse	عكس	vary	اختلف
divide	قسّم	roll	تدحرج		

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