

Interrogatives in English and Iraqi Arabic: A contrastive study

Abstract

One of the effective research methods is contrastive analysis, which can systematically deduce the linguistic features of a target language in the light of another one. This study aims to investigate the syntactic behaviour of interrogative sentences in Iraqi Arabic by contrasting and comparing them to those in English and, in part, Standard Arabic. The methodology used in this research is contrastive analysis, operating within a descriptive qualitative framework. The present study mainly lists the similarities and differences that interrogatives in English and Iraqi Arabic possess on a syntactic level. The investigation covers the four main types of interrogatives: *yes/no* interrogatives, *wh*-questions, *tag-questions*, and *alternative* questions. This study looks at various syntactic aspects of interrogatives, including structure and formation strategies, movement patterns and constraints on movement, word order, intonation patterns, and *wh* question word positioning.

The findings of this study report that interrogatives in English diverge from those in Iraqi Arabic, showing differences on various levels within the four tested interrogative types. Mainly, the structure and formation of interrogatives in Iraqi Arabic show no auxiliary verbs within the matrix, indicating the non-functionality of subject-auxiliary inversion, a distinguishing feature of interrogatives in English. Interestingly, Iraqi Arabic uses the sentence structure to form interrogatives, and the only discriminating feature is the rising terminal intonation accompanying interrogatives. Moreover, *wh*-words have a fixed initial position in English interrogative sentences; however, in Iraqi Arabic, question words are more flexible as they can occur sentence-initial, medial, or final. The word order pattern in the English interrogative is subject to subject-auxiliary verb inversion, while the Iraqi Arabic has zero inversion and higher flexibility. These distinctions regarding the position and word order of question words affect the movement patterns and the permissible movement in both languages. Generally, English, as an SVO language, consistently exhibits *wh*-movement.

While Iraqi Arabic, with its flexible word order, displays optional *wh*-fronting, likely due to the availability of both SVO and VSO word order options. Additionally, the intonation patterns of interrogatives in English and Iraqi Arabic are almost similar.

1. Introduction

Contrastive Linguistics emphasizes the systematic comparison between languages to identify similarities and differences, particularly in structure. Unlike the atomistic view, which treats linguistic units as independent, the contrastive approach underscores the interdependence of elements in language. According to Lado (1957b), predicting learning difficulties becomes possible through comparing a learner's native language and culture with the target language and culture. Crystal (2008) notes that Contrastive Analysis (CA) is particularly useful in foreign language teaching and translation, helping to identify structural differences that may hinder learning. Gleason (1955) affirms its value in developing teaching materials and refining instructional strategies. Moreover, CA plays a significant role in improving translation quality by identifying differences in vocabulary, word order, and syntactic structure, thus minimizing translation errors.

2. Research Questions

1. What are the syntactic similarities and differences in interrogative sentences in English and Iraqi dialect?
2. How do the types of interrogatives differ structurally between the two languages?
3. How is the positioning of interrogative words realized differently in English and Iraqi dialect?
4. How do word order, wh-movement, and transformation rules vary in forming questions?

3. Aims and Objectives

- Compare types of interrogatives in both languages.
- Analyze the placement and role of interrogative words.
- Investigate divergences in word order, movement, and transformations.

4. Hypotheses

1. Interrogative structures differ due to language family distinctions.
2. Significant structural variations exist in interrogative types.

3. Interrogative word positioning will distinguish both languages.
4. Syntactic phenomena such as word order and wh-movement will show major contrasts.

5. Significance of the Study

This study provides a valuable reference on interrogative structure differences, aiding learners, educators, and translators. It fills a gap in Arabic linguistic research, especially for the under-resourced Iraqi dialect. Theoretical insights will support effective teaching strategies, while practical applications include enhanced translation accuracy. Additionally, fields like computational linguistics and lexicography can benefit through improved language models and resources.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design: Structured in four stages: (1) Descriptive analysis of English interrogatives, (2) Description of Iraqi dialect interrogatives, (3) Contrastive analysis across question types (yes/no, wh-, tag, and alternative), (4) Discussion of similarities and differences.

6.2 Data Collection: Data are sourced from grammar references, articles, media content, and native speaker intuitions.

6.3 Data Analysis: Each language is analyzed descriptively, followed by a contrastive analysis to extract structural patterns.

6.4 Linguistic Features Considered:

- Word order (e.g., subject-verb inversion)
- Interrogative types
- Question word positioning
- Auxiliary usage
- Movement constraints
- Intonation patterns

7. Scope and Limitations

This research is limited to the morphological and syntactic aspects of interrogatives in English and Iraqi dialect. It excludes broader sociolinguistic and discourse-level considerations, although Modern Standard Arabic may be referenced to support dialectal analysis.

Thesis outline

Chapter Two: This chapter undertakes a comprehensive examination of the existing literature. The initial section critically evaluates the fundamental concepts and techniques of contrastive analysis, as well as their application in previous scholarly works. Subsequently, the notion of a sentence is thoroughly explored and defined in both English and Arabic terminologies. Furthermore, this chapter investigates the typology of sentences in English, Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), and Iraqi dialect. The fifth section presents a meticulous review of studies on interrogative sentences, which is divided into three subsections: English interrogative sentences, interrogative sentences in Classical Arabic and MSA, and interrogative sentences in Iraqi dialect.

Chapter Three: This chapter focuses on the description and analysis of the structure of interrogative sentences in English. It comprehensively examines the morphological and syntactical aspects of question words, clauses, and sentences in English, providing an extensive account of the interrogation process in this language.

Chapter four: This chapter provides a linguistic description and analysis of the interrogative structure in Iraqi dialect. The data collected is examined morphologically and syntactically to reveal the distinctive features and properties of interrogation in Iraqi dialect. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) interrogation is employed as a comparative tool for studying the corresponding structures in Iraqi dialect to facilitate this analysis.

Chapter Five: This chapter conducts a systematic contrastive analysis between the interrogative structures of the two languages. The aim is to highlight both similarities and differences between the two languages in terms of their interrogative patterns. The similarities and differences are the main findings of the study.

Chapter six: This concluding chapter presents the findings of our study, offering a comprehensive overview of our research outcomes. Each point is thoroughly discussed, along with its implications. We present our final remarks along with research recommendations and suggestions for future research directions.

Results:

1. The structure of *yes/no_* questions in English is different from those in Iraqi Arabic. *Yes/no_* questions in English are formed using primary, modal or dummy auxiliary verbs using the subject-auxiliary inversion in almost all cases. However, Iraqi Arabic forms *yes/no* questions using the same statement structure with a rising terminal intonation and, in certain cases, question-initial optional verificational pronouns. Such structure specifications have their implication on the movement, word order, verb patterns, agreement and tense marking, as well as intonation patterns in both languages, which are summarized below:
 - In English, almost all of the primary auxiliary verbs –except *had* necessitate subject-auxiliary agreement in person and number. The time marking is also specified in almost all the cases. The dummy auxiliary verbs in the present form have the subject-auxiliary agreement in person and number; however, in the past version, this requirement disappears. Iraqi Arabic, on the other hand, does not require any agreement condition as it has no auxiliary verbs involved in the formation of Iraqi *yes/no_* questions.
 - The word order of English *yes/no_* questions undergoes the subject-auxiliary inversion. Such inversion is non-functional in Iraqi Arabic.
 - The movement pattern of English *yes/no_* interrogatives exhibits two patterns based on the auxiliary used:
 - Primary and modal auxiliaries move from inflection to the C position.
 - Dummy auxiliary verbs are inserted into the tense position and advance from I to C.

- The intonation patterns of *yes/no* interrogatives in both English as well as Iraqi Arabic show rising terminal intonation; however, in Iraqi Arabic it plays an essential role of differentiating between statement and *yes/no* question.
 - As Iraqi Arabic *yes/no* questions lack subject-verb inversion, it shows zero movement resulting from maintaining the same word order of the statements.
 - In some instances, *yes/no* questions in Iraqi Arabic use what is known as */ʔasim almafʔuwl/* ‘past participle’ to indicate certain modal auxiliaries, namely ‘should and can’ in direct translation from English to Iraqi Arabic. However, it functions as adverbial rather than modal auxiliaries.
2. The structure of *wh*-questions is distinct in English from that of Iraqi Arabic in the following points:
- English *wh*-questions apply subject auxiliary inversion and use a fixed word order where the *wh*-words have to occur in sentence-initial. However, in Iraqi Arabic, the word order is more flexible, allowing for *wh*-words to occur in sentences initial, medial or final. Again, subject-auxiliary inversion is not applicable in Iraqi *wh*-interrogatives due to the nature of auxiliaries in Iraqi Arabic.
 - Movement patterns of *wh*-question in English show different forms from those of Iraqi which is explained based on the differing positions of *wh*-words and the need for the inversion of the subject and auxiliary verb. The *wh*-movement in both languages can be described as follows:
 - English follows a strict rule for *wh*-movement, where the movement of *wh*-words is required to form interrogative structures.
 - Iraqi Arabic exhibits optional *wh*-fronting, allowing the *wh*_word to stay in its in-situ location or migrate to the clause-initial position as per speaker preference.
3. *Wh*-questions in English and Iraqi Arabic share similar intonation patterns, that is, a falling terminal intonation in English as well as Iraqi Arabic.
4. Tag interrogatives in English and Iraqi Arabic exhibit the following features:
- In English, tag questions are of two types: canonical and invariant tag questions; however, in Iraqi Arabic, they belong to the invariant type.

- In contrast to canonical tag questions in English, tag inquiries in Iraqi Arabic do not require agreement in terms of syntactic independence as they manifest themselves into the invariant type.
 - The polarity pattern of tag questions in English and Iraqi is as follows:
 - English tag questions can have constant polarity (rare) or reverse polarity.
 - Uniquely Iraqi Arabic allows for negative constant polarity in addition to the reverse and constant polarity patterns.
 - Movement patterns of tag questions in English as well as Iraqi Arabic are similar to their *yes/no* questions counterparts.
5. Alternative questions in English differ from those in Iraqi Arabic, though they share the same typology of the two main types *yes/no*_ alternatives and *wh*_ alternative questions, they differ in terms of structure as the following:
- English alternative questions are formed by applying subject-auxiliary inversion and the insertion of the disjunctive *or* before the last alternative.
 - Iraqi alternative questions, on the other hand, are formed using the statement structure combined with the alternatives separated by the disjunction */luw/* ‘or’.
 - The movement patterns of alternative questions in English as well as Iraqi Arabic are similar to their *yes/no* and *wh*- questions counterparts.