

Nominal Infinitive in English and Arabic: A Contrastive Study

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Outline

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What is Infinitive?

"Infinitive is a grammatical term referring to the form that "expresses the notion of the verb in its general sense, not as it applies to any particular subject"

(Eckersley & Eckersley, 1960: 230).



The infinitive is in origin a neuter abstract noun. its function is to express the action in the most indefinite manner. In modern English it possesses two forms: the ***bare infinitive*** and the ***to-infinitive***.

(OEDHP, s.v. infinitive)



Arabic has two forms of infinitive which are *maṣḍar masbuk bi'dati sabk* (marked infinitive) and *maṣḍar masbuk min ġeyri 'dati sabk* (unmarked infinitive). (Hassan, 1966: 407)

The Arabic infinitive with أَنْ can be associated with a past, present, future, or imperative verb. Consider the following examples respectively:



• **وَتِلْكَ نِعْمَةٌ تَمُنُّهَا عَلَيَّ أَنْ عَبَّدتَّ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ.**
(الشعراء : 22)

• **قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي أَخَافُ أَنْ يُكَذِّبُونِ.**
(الشعراء:12)

• **عَلِمَ أَنْ سَيَكُونُ مِنْكُمْ مَرْضًى...**
(المزمل:20)

• **أَنَا أَرْسَلْنَا نُوحًا إِلَى قَوْمِهِ أَنْ أَنْذِرْ قَوْمَكَ مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ يَأْتِيَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ**
(نوح:1)



Methodology

The structures of the infinitive in English and Arabic will be put in contrast from the very beginning of the paper to highlight the similarities and differences between the nominal uses of the infinitives in these languages.



Sources of the Examples are:

Grammar books of English,
the Holy Quran and the books of Prophetic
Hadith.

المعجم المفهرس لالفاظ الحديث النبوي by A. E. Wincing.

The Holy Quran: Translation and Commentary.
2nd Edition (1977) by Abdullah Yusuf Ali.



Nominal uses of the Infinitive

1. *Subject of a Sentence*

- To see a fine play exhilarates me.

(Frank, 1972: 331)

قَالَ إِنِّي لَيَحْزُنُنِي أَنْ تَذْهَبُوا بِهِ.... (يوسف : 13)

أَلَمْ يَأْنِ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَنْ تَخْشَعَ قُلُوبُهُمْ لِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ وَمَا نَزَلَ مِنْ

الْحَقِّ... (الحديد: 16)



To succeed in the exam is a blessing.

... وَأَنْ تَصُومُوا خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ (البقره : 184)
قَالَ فَادْهَبْ فَإِنَّ لَكَ فِي الْحَيَاةِ أَنْ تَقُولَ لَا مِسَاسَ... (طه : 97)
مَا كَانَ لِلْمُشْرِكِينَ أَنْ يَعْمُرُوا مَسَاجِدَ اللَّهِ ... (التوبة : 17)
لَيْسَ الْبِرُّ أَنْ تُولُوا وَجُوهَكُمْ قِبَلَ الْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ... (البقرة:177)
... عَسَىٰ أَلَّا أَكُونَ بِدُعَاءِ رَبِّي شَقِيًّا (مريم: 48)



2. Subject Complement:

- His advice is to forgive my neighbour.

... قَالَ آيَّتِكَ أَلَّا تُكَلِّمَ النَّاسَ ثَلَاثَةَ أَيَّامٍ إِلَّا رَمْرًا ... (ال عمران: 41)
وَقَالَ لَهُمْ نَبِيُّهُمْ إِنَّ آيَةَ مُلْكِهِ أَنْ يَأْتِيَكُمُ التَّابُوتُ فِيهِ سَكِينَةٌ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ ... (البقرة: 248)

وَمَا كَانَ هَذَا الْقُرْآنُ أَنْ يُفْتَرَىٰ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ... (يونس: 37)

... وَلَيْسَ الْبِرُّ بِأَنْ تَأْتُوا الْبُيُوتَ مِنْ ظُهُورِهَا ... (البقرة: 189)

... فَعَسَى اللَّهُ أَنْ يَأْتِيَ بِالْفَتْحِ أَوْ أَمْرٍ مِّنْ عِنْدِهِ... (المائدة: 52)



- The sun was about to set.

إذا المجد القديم توارثته بناة السوء أوشك أن يضيعا

(معن بن أوس_ النحو الواضح: 3/ 127)

ما كدت أن أصلى العصر حتى كادت الشمس أن تغرب

(ibin 'aqīl, 1964: 293')



3. Direct Object:

- He wants to study English.
- I advised him to study English.
- He doesn't know what to say.

يُرِيدُونَ أَنْ يُطْفِئُوا نُورَ اللَّهِ بِأَفْوَاهِهِمْ ... (التوبة: 32)
وَمَا مَنَعَ النَّاسَ أَنْ يُؤْمِنُوا إِذْ جَاءَهُمُ الْهُدَىٰ إِلَّا أَنْ قَالُوا أَبَعَثَ
اللَّهُ بَشْرًا رَسُولًا (الاسراء: 94)



4. Retained Object:

- The student was asked to write the lesson.

... قُلْ إِنَّمَا أُمِرْتُ أَنْ أَعْبُدَ اللَّهَ وَلَا أُشْرِكَ بِهِ ۚ إِلَيْهِ أَدْعُو وَإِلَيْهِ
مَآبِ (الرعد: 36)



5. Appositive:

- Your ambition, to become a farmer, requires the energy that you so obviously have.

قُلْ إِنَّمَا أَعْظُمُ بِوَاحِدَةٍ أَنْ تَقُومُوا لِلَّهِ مِثْلِي وَفِرَادَىٰ ثُمَّ تَتَفَكَّرُوا
... (سبأ: 46)



6. Adjective Complement :

- John is easy to please.

جديرون يوماً أن ينالوا فيستعلوا

(زهير _ لسان العرب _ جدر)

7. Objective Complement :

- The police reported the traffic to be heavy.

8. Object of Preposition:

رَضُوا بِأَنْ يَكُونُوا مَعَ الْخَوَالِفِ وَطُبِعَ عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ فَهُمْ لَا يَفْقَهُونَ (التوبة: 87)

وَإِنْ جَاهَدَاكَ عَلَىٰ أَنْ تُشْرِكَ بِي مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ فَلَا تُطِعْهُمَا (لقمان: 15)

فَقُلْ هَلْ لَكَ إِلَىٰ أَنْ تَزَكَّىٰ (النازعات: 18)



Findings

In both English and Arabic, the infinitive in a nominal position is used as:

- **Subject of verb.**
- **Direct object.**
- **Retained object.**
- **Appositive.**
- **Adjective complement.**



However, the nominal infinitives in English and Arabic differ in the following aspects:

- Whereas the English infinitive is used as subject of the verb "be" in the present, the Arabic infinitive is used as مبتدأ of a nominal sentence, i.e. a sentence free from verb "be" (كان).



- Only the English infinitive is used with wh-words.
- The Arabic infinitive is introduced by the emphatic particle **إِنَّ** which is usually translated "verily".



- The Arabic infinitive is used as **subject** of the verbs **عسى** and **كان**, **ليس**. This use of the infinitive is rendered in English into various structures according to the context in which the Arabic infinitive is used with these verbs.



- The Arabic infinitive functioning as predicate of the verbs عسى , كان , ليس is not necessarily rendered in English into infinitive functioning as predicate of the English counterparts of these verbs.



- The infinitive in English is used as subjective complement after the verb "be" whereas the Arabic infinitive is used as predicate of a nominal sentence.



- The Arabic infinitive occurs as predicate of the verbs **أوشك** and **كاد** which does not always have a corresponding infinitival construction in English.
- Only the English infinitive occurs as objective complement.



- Only the Arabic infinitive occurs as object of preposition.
- In Arabic, the infinitive occurs as direct object of the verb استطاع, whereas it does not occur with English equivalent.



- The English verb "go on" (=continue) which takes the infinitive as direct object has no Arabic equivalent taking the infinitive as direct object, too.
- Unlike the Arabic infinitive, the English infinitive is not affected by the number and the gender of the subject.



Conclusions

From the findings of the study, it can be concluded that although the infinitives in English and Arabic have almost similar nominal functions, they have idiosyncratic features. There is not always one-to-one correspondence between the structures of the infinitive in English and Arabic. Therefore, one should be cautious when translating between the two languages, or when teaching English to Arabic-speaking learners.



Thank you

Questions time

