

# Making interrogative sentences in English and Persian languages: A contrastive analysis (CA) approach

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**Abstract**-The aim of this paper is to investigate the forms of questions in Persian and English in order to identify the similarities and differences between them. CA may look at linguistic structures in a twofold way: predictability power and wash back effect (Cheng, Watanabe & Curtis, 2004). The former deals with foreseeing the areas of problems the Iranian learners may commit and the latter refers to the effect of diagnostic value of CA on improvement of teaching processes. CA in the present study focuses on interrogative sentences which are in the form of questions (e.g., *Did you clean the table?*) which play a very important role in learning English among Iranian high school students. Many Iranian learners, especially at the elementary and intermediate levels, have a lot of problems with the production of English questions accurately. Thus this study is mainly a descriptive survey based on Huddleston and Pullum's (2002) classification. Finally, some implications of using Interrogative sentences for Iranian high school language learners and teachers will be presented. Therefore, students may easily make interrogative sentences in English.

**Key words**- Interrogative sentences; English; Persian; contrastive analysis (CA)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Contrastive analysis of two languages which deals with the similarities and differences in terms of linguistic structures has been studied since the 1940s. It could be a useful predictor of where second language students would likely encounter problems in learning a second language (Gorjian, Alipour & Saffarian, 2012). It stood to reason that if certain elements of a second language differed greatly from the students' native language, that student would likely encounter difficulties (Schackne, 2002, p. 2). Nord (1991, p.88) argued that linguistic problems arise from differences of structure in the vocabulary and syntax of second language (SL) and target language. Some of these problems may be caused by what Newmark (1988) calls "false friends" or by situations of one-to many or one to-zero equivalence. These problems can also be caused by lack of grammar knowledge in the Source language (SL) or the Target Language (TL) (Nord, 1991, p. 89).

Based on the Schackne's (2002) definition and Nord's (1991) statement, by focusing on the differences existing in native and target language, we can predict the difficulties the learners may encounter in learning the target language. Moreover, as Brown (2004, p.298) stated, before the learner becomes familiar with the system of the second language, the native language is the only linguistic system

upon which the learner can draw (Zhang & Wu, 2008, 2011a, 2011b). Therefore, not having enough knowledge in this sense will lead learners to use their own system of syntax in the TL and this interference(s) makes them Erroneous.

Since ever the emergence of contrastive analysis up to now, many researchers (e.g., Schackne, 2002) have used this technique to identify the areas of difficulties for second and foreign language learners. A large number of linguistic items and rules have been compared and contrasted between English and Persian by different authors, e.g. simple past and past progressive tenses in English and Persian (Fallahi, 1991), English and Persian stress (Hayati, 1997). However, a linguistic item that is rarely compared and contrasted between these two languages is question or making question.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Hornby (2005, p.1235) defines a question as a sentence, phrase or word that asks for information. According to Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan (1999, p. 211), questions are many times more common in conversation than in writing. Questions are most typically expressed by full independent clauses in the written registers, while nearly half of the questions in conversation

consist of fragments or tags (Biber et al., 1999, p. 211). Halliday (1994) also argues that interrogatives can be defined in terms of how they function in the mood system to express the interpersonal structure of the clause, examining the relationships between mood and speech acts and the kinds of choices each typically makes available. According to Webber (1994, p. 226), questions create anticipation, arouse interest, challenge the reader into thinking about the topic of the text, and have a direct appeal in bringing the second person into a kind of dialogue with the writer, which other rhetorical devices do not have to the same extent (Zhang, Wu, Wei & Wang, 2011). Questions have been classified differently by different authors and each author has his/her own way to classify them. Long and Sato (1983) distinguished two types of questions based on the purpose of questioning: referential and display questions. The purpose of using a referential question is to seek information, while the purpose of using a display question is to elicit language practice (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Based on the function of questioning, Long and Sato (1983) distinguished three sub-types of questions: comprehension checks, confirmation checks, and clarification requests. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) and Biber et al. (1999) also classified questions on the basis of their forms into four major types: yes/no questions, Wh-questions (i.e., interrogative sentence with interrogative pronouns), tag questions, and alternative questions.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Among all classification, Huddleston and Pullum's (2002) classification has been adopted by the author of this paper. According to Huddleston and Pullum (2002, p. 867), based on the way the question define the set of answers, there are three kinds of questions: polar, alternative and variable questions. And these three types of questions were selected as the theoretical framework for this study. Polar questions have as answers a pair of polar opposites, positive and negative (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 868). For example:

Are you a student?  
Yes, I am/ No, I am not.

The second kind of question is alternative questions. Huddleston and Pullum (2002, p.898) defined alternative questions as the questions which have as answers a set of alternatives given in the question itself (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 868). For example, the answers to "Will you leave on Thursday or Friday?" are either "Thursday" or "Friday. The last kind is variable questions. Variable questions have a propositional consisting of an open proposition...Prototypically, set of answers will be open-ended." (p. 898). In addition, based on these three kinds of questions, the contrastive analysis between English and Persian will be done.

CA between English and Persian items has intrigued many Iranian researchers. Among them, by making a contrast between Persian and English intonation, Hayati (1996) has predicted some problems Iranian learners of English may encounter with intonation patterns in English. A contrastive analysis of Persian and English adverbs was also performed by Mirhasani (2001) and the similarities and differences between different kinds of adverbs in the languages in question were noticed. There are many other valuable contrastive analysis studies, but for the reason of space they cannot be discussed here in details. In recent years the attention of some researchers in contrastive analysis has been turned to the comparing of rhetoric patterns and generic structures of different text types in English and Persian (e.g. Gorjian, Pazhakh & Naghizadeh, 2012; Mahzari & Maftoon, 2007).

## 4. PROCEDURE

### 4.1. Forms of questions in Persian language

Polar questions in Persian have different forms. The most prototypical form is interrogative clause. Here the question word [aya] is inserted at the beginning of the sentence. Notice that there is no change in word order and by changing the tense of the sentence and verb the question word does not change. For example:

[?aya ?æli moælem ?æst?] (*Is Ali a teacher?*)  
[?aya shoma inja kar mikonid?] (*Do you work here?*)  
[?aya ? ?æli ketab ra ?avard?] (*Did Ali bring the book?*)

Another form is declarative question. This kind has a declarative syntax signaled by the rising of intonation. For example:

[pedæræt xone ?æst?] (*Your father is at home?*)  
[mixai beri xone?] (*You want to go home?*)  
[diroz ræfti mædrese] (*You went to school yesterday?*)

Polar questions end with a rising tone. In fact, the speaker has some idea about the message and accordingly s/he is intending to receive confirmation or rejection to her/his question (Hayati, 2005).

Tag question is also a kind of polar question. As Huddleston and Pullum (2002, p. 892) stated interrogative clause added as a supplement to the declarative clause is called the tag. In Persian, in addition to question-tags made based on the main clause, there are some other words and phrases such as "mæge næ, næ, ?intor nist", which come at the end of the statements and function as question tag (Hayati, 2005, p. 95). According to Hayati (2005, p. 79), if the tag is expressed with a rising tone, the speaker is seeking information; nevertheless when s/he uses a fall, confirmation of the idea is of concern. For example:

[ketab ra naxoondi, xoondi?] (*You didn't read the book, did you?*)

[har roz miri xærid, mæge næ?] (*You go shopping every day, don't you?*)

Alternative questions in Persian are realized by the coordinator [ya] (or). Alternative questions are presented in two forms. Interrogative clause in which the word question [aya] comes at the beginning of the sentence and the coordinator [ya] (or) is placed between the alternatives. The alternatives cause the questions to have a falling tone at the end (Hayati, 2005, p. 78). For example:

[aya omid laqær æst ya čaq?] (*Is Omid thin or short?*)

Alternative questions are also realized in declarative form signaled by the falling tone at the end. For instance: [sib mixai ya porteقال ya moz?] (*You like apple, orange or banana?*)

Finally, variable questions have interrogative form containing question words. These words express the variable. Some of these question words are: [čæ kæsi, ki] (*who*), [kodam] (*which*), [koja] (*where*), [čæ moqe, kei] (*when*), [čæra] (*why*), ....

Variable questions end with a falling intonation but the voice rises on the question word (Hayati, 2005, p. 95). For example:

[ki goldan ra ?avard?] (*Who brought the vase?*). Notice that in Persian, when the question words function as subject, they usually occupy the position of subject and when they function as object they take the position of object. But this is not a rule of thumb in Persian and According to Iranian linguists, as mentioned by Mirsaeedi and Mansouri (2012), *wh*-movement in Persian questions is optional. It may or may not occur. In either case, the resulting sentence will be grammatical. For example:

[shoma koja miravid] or [koja shoma miravid]? (*Where do you go?*)

[ki shoma ro did?] (*Who saw you?*)

## 4.2. Forms of questions in English language

Like Persian, Polar questions in English have interrogative and declarative form. There are some basic rules for making interrogative questions in English: (1) Auxiliary and modal auxiliary verbs normally come before the subject. For example: **Have you** received my letter of June 17? , *Can he* drive the car? (Swan, 1995, p.474) ; (2) If there is no other auxiliary verb, we use *do*, *does* or *did* to form a question. Example: Do you like football? (ibid); (3) Do is not used together with other auxiliary verbs or with be. Example: can you tell me the time (not do you can tell me the time) (ibid); (4) Only the auxiliary verb goes before the subjects, not the whole of the verb. As an example: *Is your mother* coming tomorrow? (not *Is coming your mother* tomorrow?) (Swan, 1995, p.475).

simply speaking, Interrogative question is formed in two ways: 1. by changing the place of *to be* (am , is , are , was , were), auxiliary verbs (am , is , are, was, were, have , has, had) and modal auxiliary verbs (*will, shall, would, can, etc*) with the subject 2. By using an auxiliary verb according to the tense of the statement. That is, for simple present *do* and *does* (third singular person), and for simple past *did* is used. For example:

*Are you at home?* (Movement of *to be* verb)

*Were they playing football?* (Movement of auxiliary verb)

*Have you gone there?* (Movement of Auxiliary verb)

*Can you do that for me?* (Movement of modal auxiliary verb)

*Does she work in a company?* (Inserting an auxiliary verb)

*Did he see a lion?* (Inserting an auxiliary verb)

Declarative form has declarative syntax signaled by the rising of intonation. For example:

*You went home?*

Tag questions, as a kind of polar question, in English are made just based on the main clause. For example:

*She is beautiful, isn't she?*

*She isn't beautiful, is she?*

Tags questions can be used for imperatives or suggestions. After imperatives,

*Won't you* to often used to invite people to do things, and *will/would/can/can't/could you* to tell or ask people to do things (Swan, 2000, p. 480). For example:

*Give me a hand, will you?*

*Do sit down, won't you?*

*Open the door, won't you?*

*Let's go to the cinema, shall we?*

The tag is raised or fell depending on the illocutionary of the utterance. The rising tag expresses doubted or asked for verification. Meanwhile, the rising tag expresses acknowledgement that the main clause is true (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 894).

The essential feature of alternative questions is the coordinator *or*. The intonation is usually raised on the first alternative and fell on the last one. Making alternative questions is similar to that of polar questions besides putting *or* between alternatives. For example:  
Is he short or tall?

The last kind of questions, variable questions, in English has interrogative form with *Wh*-question pronouns at the beginning of statements. These words such *who, which, whom, where, when, ...* Are used to express the variable in English. For example: Who broke the vase?

Variable questions in English end with a fall intonation and the voice rises on the content word (Hayati, 2005).

According to Swan (1995, p.472) the word *who*, *whom*, *whose*, *which*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why* and *how* are used in questions to show what kind of information is wanted.

When *who*, *which*, *what* or *whose* is the subject (or part of the subject), the question word comes before the verbs, and *do* cannot normally be used. Example: *Who left the door open?* (not *who did leave the door open?*) (Swan, 1995, p. 475). On the other hand, when a question word is the object, *do* is used. Example: *Who do you want to speak to?* (ibid).

The findings of a corpus-based study conducted by Biber et al. (1999) indicated that *Wh*-pronouns make up a relatively low percentage, which indicates that questions in conversation used less to seek information than to maintain or reinforce the common ground among the participants (Biber et al. 1999, p. 212).

### 4.3. CA of questions' forms

Based on the description of questions' form and usage of two languages in question, which was mentioned earlier, first the similarities between them, which can be positive transfer, will be mentioned. Then, the differences and the problems resulting from those differences will be discussed.

Firstly, all three kinds of questions with rather similar intonation pattern exist in both languages. Polar and alternative questions in both languages can be realized in interrogative and declarative forms. Tag questions also exist in both languages. The speakers of both languages use polar questions to see whether the information of the question is correct or not. In both languages, the speakers use alternative questions to set some alternatives for addressees to choose from. Secondly, variable questions in English are equivalent to variable questions in Persian. They are used to ask for information of people, facts, events, time. Both of them use interrogative pronouns, which are equivalent. For example, *Who*=ki, *What*=čhi, čhe kari, *When*=kei, *Where*=koja, *Whose*=male ki, *Why*=čhe. These interrogative words can be used as questions in two languages.

However, there are remarkable differences between them. First, they differ in the way the interrogative form is formed. As mentioned before, in Persian we put the question word [aya] at the beginning of the sentence. Unlike English, the word order is not changed and we have no auxiliary verb to be used according to the tense of the sentence whereas in English, we need to change the word order, insert auxiliary verbs on the basis of the tense of the sentence. In short, the word order of making question in English and Persian are presented below:

English: Auxiliary verbs/ model verbs/to be+S+V+C

Persian: [aya] + S+C+V

The tags of tags questions in English always formed from the main clause and have the opposite forms of auxiliary verbs, model verbs, and to be. However, their equivalents in Persian, in addition to question-tags made based on the main clause, there are some other words and

phrases such as "mæge næ, næ, ?intor nist", which come at the end of the statements and function as question tag (Hayati, 2005, p. 95). Moreover, the grammatical rule of tags questions in English is generally complex. The question tag for *I am* is *aren't I* (Swan, 2000, p. 480). For example: *I'm late, aren't I*. Tags questions in English are also used for imperatives and suggestions. However, this kind of tags question has no equivalent in Persian. Another difference is that in variable questions, interrogative words in English regardless of their function as subject or object, come at the beginning of the sentence whereas in Persian they can take the position of subject and object, that is, they can occupy any place of the sentence. Furthermore, variable questions in English end with a fall intonation and the voice rises on the content word whereas variable questions in Persian end with a falling intonation but the voice rises on the question word (Hayati, 2005, p. 95).

### 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Concerning the similarities and differences mentioned above, the following predictions are derived from the contrast of two languages in terms of making questions: Due to the facts that questions in Persian and English have many common features, Iranian learners of English can make some positive transfer to produce the question in the target language easily (Gorjian, Pazhakh & Parang, 2012). For example, when making questions to ask for information, students can apply variable question forms. Therefore, when teaching question form, teachers can translate directly English to Persian in order that students can understand the grammar points. However, the differences between the two languages in question, may lead learners of English to make some errors. The most common errors they may encounter are due to the form of interrogative sentences. There are some rules for making interrogative form in English that do not exist in Persian. Such as the inversion of auxiliary verbs, modal verbs and to be, using *do* and *does* when there is no auxiliary. As a result, the students may construe *do* as an equivalent for [aya] and use it along with auxiliary and modal verbs.

Another problem may emerge from transferring the structure of variable questions in Persian to English. As mentioned before, *wh*-movement is optional in Persian whereas it is obligatory in English. For example the sentence *You saw who in the street?* may be produced by a student on the basis of its Persian equivalent [shoma če kæsi ra dær xiyaban didid?]. Moreover, in variable questions the students may tend to put the stress on the interrogative word. Additionally, lacking the knowledge of when to use or not to use *do* after interrogative word is another area problem for Iranian learners English. As mentioned before, when interrogative word is the subject (or part of the subject), the question word comes before the verbs and *do* cannot normally be used. On the other hand, when the question word is the object, *do* is used. So, an ungrammatical sentence is like *What did happen?* may be used due to the lack of knowledge (Zhang Wang, Wu &

Huo, 2011). Another problem concerns with tag questions, as it was said before, in Persian in addition to the tags derived from the main clause, there are some words or phrases (such as *mage nae*, *intor nist*) which function as a tag. The students may apply this rule in English and make an equivalent for these words and phrases.

In brief, the paper aimed to have an overview of interrogative structures in Persian and English to explore the similarities and differences between them as well as making some predictions based on these similarities and differences. Although this is just one of the aspects of contrastive analysis, it may help teachers as well as their students overcome some difficulties they have encountered and improve their English language teaching and learning regarding the formats of questions in English and Persian languages from CA perspectives.

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