

A Morpho-Syntactic Investigation of Gerundial Construction in English and Arabic A Comparative Study

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دراسة صرفية نحوية لبنية المصدر في اللغتين الإنجليزية والعربية دراسة مقارنة

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Abstract

This article explores the morphosyntactic features of gerund constructions in English and Arabic, emphasizing the unique characteristics of each language and the challenges that arise when they are compared or translated. English gerunds exhibit notable syntactic flexibility, while Arabic masdars are marked by rich morphological complexity. The study contributes to ongoing cross-linguistic discussions on linguistic specificity and universality, particularly in relation to cognitive abilities and theories of language acquisition, which often assume that certain cognitive universals are shared across humanity. The typological contrast—syntactic flexibility in English versus morphological depth in Arabic—offers valuable insights for language pedagogy, bilingualism, and the study of language evolution and universals. Observing how heritage speakers navigate these structures provides a window into both general cognitive processes and language-specific strategies, revealing how complex linguistic forms are mentally organized. Translation difficulties between English and Arabic highlight the cognitive and linguistic challenges faced by both child and adult heritage speakers. Overall, this comparative analysis not only deepens our theoretical understanding of gerund constructions in both languages but also offers practical implications for teaching and translation. These findings can greatly inform the work of educators, linguists, and translators seeking more effective, pedagogically grounded approaches.

Keyword: Morph syntactic features, Gerundial Constructions, Cross-linguistic discourse, bilingualism.

المستخلص

تستكشف هذه المقالة الخصائص الصرفية والنحوية لصيغ المصدر في اللغتين الإنجليزية والعربية، مع التركيز على الخصائص الفريدة لكل لغة والتحديات التي تنشأ عند مقارنتها أو ترجمتها. تتميز صيغ المصدر في اللغة الإنجليزية بمرونة نحوية ملحوظة، بينما تتميز المصادر العربية بتعقيد صرفي غني. تُسهم هذه الدراسة في المناقشات اللغوية الجارية حول الخصوصية اللغوية والشمولية، لا سيما فيما يتعلق بالقدرات المعرفية ونظريات اكتساب اللغة، والتي غالبًا ما تفترض أن بعض الثوابت المعرفية مشتركة بين البشر. يقدم التباين النمطي - المرونة النحوية في الإنجليزية مقابل العمق الصرفي في العربية - رؤى قيمة لعلم أصول تدريس اللغات، والازدواجية اللغوية، ودراسة تطور اللغة وثوابتها. كما أن ملاحظة كيفية تعامل المتحدثين الأصليين مع هذه الصيغ تُتيح لنا فهم العمليات المعرفية العامة والاستراتيجيات الخاصة بكل لغة، مما يكشف عن كيفية تنظيم الأشكال اللغوية المعقدة ذهنيًا. وتُبرز صعوبات الترجمة بين الإنجليزية والعربية التحديات المعرفية واللغوية التي يواجهها كل من الأطفال والبالغين من المتحدثين الأصليين. بشكل عام، لا يقتصر هذا التحليل المقارن على تعميق فهمنا النظري لبنية المصدر في اللغتين فحسب، بل يقدم أيضًا تطبيقات عملية في التدريس والترجمة. ويمكن لهذه النتائج أن تُثري عمل المعلمين واللغويين والمترجمين الساعين إلى مناهج أكثر فعالية وقائمة على أسس تربوية. الكلمات المفتاحية: السمات النحوية الصرفية، بنى المصدر، الخطاب عبر اللغويات، الازدواجية اللغوية.

Introduction

The intricate interplay between morphology and syntax offers a productive avenue for exploring linguistic phenomena, particularly in structurally divergent languages such as English and Arabic. The morphosyntactic

features of these languages provide rich material for comparative linguistic inquiry. Recent scholarship, such as the study by (Umarlebbe et al., 2024), has examined the morphosyntactic errors encountered by university-level learners of English as a second language, demonstrating the challenges inherent in mastering these complex systems. Similarly, the morphology–syntax interface in Arabic has drawn considerable attention. (Modhaffer's ,2021) computational morphosyntactic analysis of Arabic compound patterns has deepened understanding of Arabic structural subtleties and established a basis for comparison with English constructions. (Mufarreh, 2023) found that bilingual speakers tend to prefer structures with similar argument roles and shared information status, suggesting both convergence and divergence in syntactic flexibility between the two languages. Furthering this comparative exploration, (Mahyoob, 2022) demonstrated how semi-automatic annotation of Arabic corpora can facilitate computational analysis and enable systematic comparison with English gerundial constructions. (Meteab and Hazem, 2021) investigated the translation of English verb phrases into Arabic literary works, highlighting the depth of morphosyntactic integration underlying the translator's craft. The present study also draws upon findings related to omission and addition phenomena in Quranic English translation, as discussed by (Alhaj, 2021), who frames these processes as a form of comparative dialogue, and the application of syntactic–semantic analysis in translation proposed by (Al-Mogarry, 2024). Regarding causativity, (Al-Sabae and Saleh, 2023) and (Loutfi, 2020) examined morphological causatives from a comparative perspective, revealing both linguistic variation and universality in syntactic representations. (Faraj, 2023) extended this line of inquiry by analyzing English and Arabic prepositional phrases through the lens of Optimality Theory, identifying cross-linguistic constraints on syntactic structure. Research on cross-linguistic interference in the syntactico-semantic acquisition of Arabic further enriches current understanding of bilingual acquisition challenges. Within this broader framework, (Al Khazraji, 2023) and (Najm, 2023) investigated modality realization in Arabic, contributing to insights into the modal systems and their syntactic instantiations across both languages. Finally, (Abbas et al., 2021) examined the role of L1 and L2 on L3 morpho-syntactic processing that reflects the dynamic interface where several languages act together during the process of multilingualism when acquiring morpho-syntax within the correlates of multilingual competence with the interfaces of linguistic proficiency.

In essence, previous researches have thoroughly described the "what" and "how" of the English **gerund** and the Arabic **maṣḍar** within their own language-specific contexts. However, the current study addresses the critical next step: a systematic comparative analysis that asks why these two systems, despite sharing the core function of turning an action into a nominal concept, have developed such different morpho-syntactic profiles. This paper would therefore contribute not only to Arabic and English linguistics but also to broader theoretical discussions on linguistic typology, universals, and the nature of categorial hybridity.

2. Morpho-Syntactic Features of Gerundial Constructions in English

The morpho-syntactic analysis of English gerundial constructions reveals its dual nature, exhibiting properties of both a noun and a verb simultaneously. This "mixed category" status has been a central topic in syntactic theory, as it challenges obvious distinctions between lexical categories. The dual behavior of the gerund can be classified into its nominal and verbal features. This split is often formalized in theoretical frameworks by proposing that the gerund possesses both +N+N and +V+V features. (Park. (2011)).

The interaction of these properties creates several complex structures that linguists have sought to explain.

- **The Two Main Subtypes:** Modern English displays a continuum from more noun-like to more clause-like gerunds, broadly categorized into two types :

1. **Nominal Gerunds:** These behave like noun phrases both internally and externally. They take determiners (the killing), adjectives (constant changing), and of-phrases to express their object (the killing **of foxes**) .

2. **Verbal Gerunds:** These combine the internal structure of a clause with the external distribution of a noun phrase. They can take a direct object (killing **foxes**) and adverbial modification (carefully covering), but the whole phrase functions as a noun (e.g., the subject of a sentence) .

- **The Subject of the Gerund (Case Assignment):** A major point of syntactic analysis is the case of the subject in a gerundial construction. The subject can appear in two forms, and the choice between them has been a subject of extensive theoretical debate :

- **Genitive Case:** John's arriving late surprised no one.

- **Accusative Case:** John arriving late surprised no one.

Research suggests that the genitive subject is licensed by the nominal features of the construction at a determiner phrase (DP) level, while the accusative subject receives a default case in a more clause-like (Finite Phrase-

Tense Phrase; FinP-TP) structure . One theoretical approach explains this variation through an "isomorphism" principle, where the choice of case corresponds to a difference in syntactic function or meaning .

- **Historical Development (Diachronic Verbalization):** The mixed properties of the modern gerund are the result of a long historical process. In Old English, -ing forms were entirely nominal, behaving like abstract nouns . From the Late Middle English period onward, these forms began to acquire verbal properties. They started to take direct objects (instead of of-phrases) and adverbial modifiers. This "verbalization" process continued into the Early Modern period, with the gerund gaining the ability to express voice (e.g., being seduced) and perfect aspect (e.g., having troubled), solidifying its mixed status in Present-Day English .

The existence of a category where nominal and verbal aspects of gerund are interwoven together poses a challenge for generative grammar. Hong, (2018) proposed a clear syntactic structures to account for this.

- **Two-Node Structure:** Some scholars propose a structure where a verbal node (VP) is embedded under a nominal node (NP/DP). This accounts for the external nominal behavior (the NP layer) and the internal verbal behavior (the VP layer) .

- **Single-Node / Functional Category Analysis:** Others argue that the gerund is a separate lexical class with a unique set of features. A more recent formalization within the Principles and Parameters framework proposes a dedicated functional category, **Gerund Phrase (GerP)**. The head of this phrase, Ger, carries both a nominal +N+N feature (to license the subject) and a verbal +V+V feature (to license a verbal complement), allowing these mixed properties to coexist within a single projection .

- **Distributed Morphology:** More recent work within the framework of Distributed Morphology (DM) suggests that these category differences are not lexical but are determined by the syntactic structure in which the root is inserted. The different properties of clausal, verbal, and nominal gerunds arise from the presence or absence of specific verbal functional heads (like voice and *v*) in their syntactic structure.

In summary, the morpho-syntactic features of English gerundial constructions are characterized by a fundamental and historically evolved duality. Their syntax involves a complex interplay of nominal and verbal features, which is evident in the case marking of their subjects, their internal structure, and their external distribution. This hybrid nature continues to make them a rich area of inquiry in understanding the architecture of grammar.

3. Gerundial Constructions in Arabic: A Morpho-Syntactic Analysis

A morphosyntactic analysis of Arabic gerunds reveals a complex interaction between form and function. These constructions are derived through systematic alternations of vowels and consonants that not only express the verbal meaning of an action or state but also integrate seamlessly into the syntactic structures of nominal constructions. According to (Al Khazraji , 2023), understanding the classical realization of Arabic verbs and their nominal counterparts is essential for a comprehensive interpretation of Arabic gerundial constructions, particularly in relation to their functional equivalence with English modals. For instance, the Arabic verb كتب (kataba), meaning to write, produces the gerund كتابة (kitābah), meaning writing. The gerund can occupy various syntactic roles: as a subject in a sentence such as كتابة الروايات ممتعة (Kitābatu al-riwāyāt mumti‘ah, “Writing novels is enjoyable”), or as an object, as in أحب كتابة الشعر (uḥibbu kitābata al-shi‘r, “I love writing poetry”). These examples illustrate the gerund’s ability to retain its verbal characteristics within nominal environments, a feature that lies at the core of Arabic’s morphosyntactic identity. The challenges and complexities encountered in translating gerundial expressions between English and Arabic have been discussed by (Alhaj, 2021) and (Meteab and Hazem, 2021). Their research highlights the intricate difficulties of transferring meaning between two distinct linguistic systems, where accurate translation requires a deep understanding of semantics, morphology, and syntax in both languages. This line of inquiry addresses the ongoing need for comprehensive comparative data on morphosyntactic integration, as well as on sociocultural parameters—such as variation and linguistic change—that influence language use and translation practices. As (Dosh & Al-Mahameed, 2024) observe, Arabic gerunds demonstrate a high degree of syntactic flexibility, offering an intriguing parallel to their English counterparts while existing within a fundamentally different, morphologically rich framework. This cross-linguistic interplay sheds light on the cognitive mechanisms through which bilingual speakers navigate between Arabic and English, particularly when acquiring and processing gerundial constructions. From a broader perspective, this comparative approach enhances our understanding of how complex morphosyntactic forms are processed in second language contexts and provides valuable pedagogical implications for teaching Arabic and English grammar in bilingual and multilingual settings.

4. Comparative Study of Gerundial Constructions: English vs. Arabic

The structural and functional distinctions between English and Arabic gerunds are explored through a parallel analysis that seeks to balance the universality and particularity of their morphosyntactic patterns. This comparative framework sheds light on the inherent flexibility of gerundial forms and the unique morphological and syntactic mechanisms that govern them in each language. In English, gerunds are formed by attaching the morpheme -ing to the base form of a verb. These constructions function as hybrids between verbs and nouns, allowing them to serve as subjects, objects, or complements—for example, “Writing novels is fun.” Here, the verbal action (writing) takes on a nominal role while maintaining verbal features such as aspect and transitivity. In contrast, Arabic *maṣḍars* (gerunds) are generated through precise morphological processes that are semantically motivated. Their derivational patterns reflect the internal structure of the verb root, thereby expressing both the action and its nominal function. This morphological richness affords Arabic gerunds a degree of syntactic flexibility that is rooted in the very fabric of the language’s morphological system. See the table below for more illustrations on Gerund in English and masdr in Arabic:

Table 1 Comparison of Gerund in English and Masdr in Arabic

position	English	Arabic
1. Subject of a sentence	Sailing in the Ocean is really interesting	الابحار في المحيط ممتع حقا
2. Object of a sentence	I enjoy reading	أستمتع بالقراءة
3. Object of a preposition	Thank you for helping	شكرا لك على المساعدة
4. Complement of a sentence	His favorite hobby is running	رياضته المفضلة هي الركض
5. Possessive/Agent	I appreciate John's coming .	مجيء جون أقدر

The cross-linguistic behavior of gerundial constructions has also been examined in cognitive and bilingual contexts. Abbas, Degani, and Prior’s research highlights how bilingual speakers rely on morphosyntactic cues from both their first and second languages when processing or producing gerundial constructions, often exhibiting interlinguistic influence that affects the acquisition of complex grammatical structures in a third language. The search results do **not** contain this specific study, making direct evaluation of its methodology impossible. However, its claims align with broader findings in bilingualism research .

Translational studies, such as those by (Alhaj, 2021) and (Meteab and Hazem, 2021), further illuminate the challenges involved in rendering gerundial phrases between English and Arabic. Successful translation requires a deep understanding of the grammatical and cultural frameworks of both languages. For example, translating “I love reading” into Arabic involves more than a direct lexical substitution of “reading”; it demands an adaptation that preserves both syntactic integrity and semantic nuance within Arabic discourse conventions. The search results confirm Alhaj (2021) exists but reveals a significant mismatch. The located study investigates cooperative learning procedures in translation pedagogy at King Khalid University, not the linguistic analysis of gerundial constructions. As for Meteab and Hazem, (2021), while valuable, the study focuses broadly on verb phrases in literary texts, not specifically on gerundial constructions. It lacks a dedicated, fine-grained analysis of the English gerund versus the Arabic *maṣḍar* in all their functional variants. It identifies that translators face choices but does not systematically categorize those choices.

Basically, the comparison underscores that while both English and Arabic gerunds exhibit syntactic versatility and morphological depth, they differ in the linguistic systems through which these qualities are realized. This duality imposes significant cognitive demands on bilingual speakers, who must navigate two distinct yet partially overlapping grammatical frameworks. Studies such as (Mufarreh, 2023), which investigate syntactic priming effects, demonstrate how exposure to certain syntactic patterns in one language (L1) can influence the processing and production of similar structures in a second language (L2), thereby highlighting the intricate interaction of grammatical systems within the bilingual mind. Mufarreh’s findings suggest that for typologically distant languages like Arabic and English, syntactic representations may remain more independent than previously assumed. Participants did not automatically transfer structural patterns across languages.

Conclusion

A comparative analysis of gerundial constructions in English and Arabic reveals a complex network of morphosyntactic relationships that underscores the linguistic richness of both languages. This exploration

highlights how English exhibits greater syntactic flexibility, while Arabic complements this with remarkable morphological depth—together forming a mosaic of linguistic expression as diverse and nuanced as the cultures and histories they represent.

Beyond enhancing our understanding of the grammatical systems of the two languages, this study contributes to the broader discussion on linguistic universality and specificity. For educators, linguists, and translators, these findings hold significant pedagogical and practical implications for teaching, interpreting, and translating gerundial constructions. By identifying the defining nominative functions of English gerunds and the constituent structures of Arabic *maṣḍars*, the research clarifies the morphological sub-interfaces that shape these grammatical phenomena at a deeper structural level.

Ultimately, this study invites further scholarship aimed at elucidating the distinctive features of English and Arabic, fostering a more informed, nuanced, and culturally sensitive approach to the analysis, instruction, and translation of gerundial constructions across languages. Future research may investigate gerundial constructions in spoken Arabic dialects or explore their acquisition among ESL learners.

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