

French infinitive in Arabic translation: a usage-based approach in MTT

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Abstract

This article deals with the Arabic syntactic counterparts of the French infinitive in various syntactic contexts. Special attention is paid to infinitive occurring as head of independent clause and expressing injunctive modality. Syntactic transfer is examined in order to show the necessity of a usage-based approach, which avoids giving equivalents that are grammatically correct, but weird according to common use.

1 Introduction

The infinitive is a component of many commonly used French grammatical constructions. Its complex grammatical nature is due to its high polyfunctionality. The infinitive form of the French verb may function as verb, noun, adjective or adverb (section 2).

In the present paper, we are exploring the Arabic structural equivalents of the French infinitive. This equivalent is not always a non-finite verb form, and therefore a decision must be made about the Arabic verb's tense as well as agreement in person, gender and number (PNG agreement). In some cases, choices may be made by resolving anaphoric reference within the sentence or in the preceding text (section 3). But in other cases, the choice is oriented by common usage in the target language (here, the Arabic); and we have to define the kind of text where the infinitive occurs in order to choose the appropriate counterpart. As an example, we will examine the Arabic equivalents of the infinitive expressing injunctive modality and heading a main clause through different contexts (section 4).

2 French infinitive

The infinitive is defined as a type of non-finite verb allowing the expression of a process in its most virtual form, or the action as a general concept, without specifying the circumstances, given that the form of the verb doesn't change: the infinitive form of the verb is not marked by categories such as tense, person, gender or number. Thus, it doesn't agree with a subject — the one responsible for the action in case of an infinitive is "everybody"; otherwise, the person concerned by the action in an infinitive is announced in the sentence. The abstract nature of the act evoked by an infinitive explains its usage as an entry in dictionaries. That's why we often encounter it in sentences that say something general, like *Tricher n'est pas jouer* 'Cheating is not playing' or *Il est important de faire ses devoirs* 'It is important to do homework'.

The infinitive is classified as a grammeme (= inflectional meaning) of finiteness, the inflectional category of the verb as syntactic head.¹ The finiteness category counts five grammemes: finite, infinitive, maṣḍar, participle and gerundive. All languages don't necessarily include these five values.

¹ Mel'čuk, Igor A. 1994. *Cours de morphologie générale*, volume 2. University Press of Montréal, Canada, p. 215.

French counts three infinitive forms: simple, compound and double-compound forms. Therefore, infinitive may express relative time, as simultaneity or successivity. Rémi-Giraud (1988) distinguishes two values of the infinitive:

1. Present infinitive in opposition with past infinitive
2. Present infinitive form not in opposition with a past form

The infinitive form of a verb functions as a verb, a noun, an adjective or an adverb.

As verb, infinitive may head a main clause:

- narrative infinitive: *Et Paul de rajouter* 'Then, Paul started adding things'.
- deliberative infinitive: *Où aller ?* 'Where to go?'
- exclamative infinitive: *Quoi ! ne pas dire à son patron !* 'What! Not telling his boss'.
- imperative infinitive: *Battre les œufs en neige* 'Stiffly beat the egg whites'.

The Arabic counterpart in such cases is generally an inflected verb. In order to give the appropriate translation in Arabic, we have to examine temporal or modal value of the infinitive verb and examine situational context to check for the structure commonly use, cf. section (4).

On the other hand, following the Latin model, the infinitive may be embedded within multiple syntactic structures. The first syntactic actant of the main verb is not always co-referent with the subject of the embedded infinitive verb.

The embedded infinitive can be governed by:

- a perception verb: *J'entends les enfants crier* 'I hear children yelling',
- a movement verbs: *Il a couru chercher son livre* 'He ran to search his book',
- a modal or a light verb: *Je dois fermer la porte* 'I must shut the door', *Il commence à parler* 'He starts speaking',
- the verb *aller* in a construction expressing future: *Je vais partir* 'I will go',
- the verb *venir* in a construction expressing recent past: *Je viens de sortir*, 'I just came out',
- a speech verb in interrogative indirect speech: *Je ne sais plus où aller* 'I don't know where to go',
- a relative pronoun: *Elle cherche une sale où fêter son anniversaire* 'She is searching for a place where to celebrate her birthday'.

The French infinitive can also perform:

- Nominal functions, such as subject (*Travailler est une nécessité*, 'Working is a necessity'), object complement (*Il préfère partir*, 'He prefers leaving' / *Il incite Jean à se reposer*, 'He encourages John to take a rest') and noun complement (*La peur de courir des risques*, 'The fear of taking risks'),
- Adjectival functions, such as objectival attributive (*J'appelle cela tricher*, 'I call it cheating') and complement of adjective (*Un paysage agréable à regarder*, 'a view pleasing to the eyes'),
- Adverbial functions, such as circumstantial (*Il faut manger pour vivre*, 'You must eat to live' / *Avant de dormir, tu feras tes devoirs*, 'You will do your homework before going to bed'),
- In apposition (*Il n'a qu'un souhait: voyager*, 'He has just one wish: travelling').

The complexity and the profusion of the French infinitive cannot be embraced within an article, that's why we ignored for example infinitive chains like *J'ai fait promettre à Jean de partir* 'I made John promise to go'.

3 Translating the particularities of the French infinitive into Arabic

Arabic doesn't have an infinitive form. Instead, as a non-finite form of the verb, it counts a verbal noun, the *maṣḍar*. Therefore, *maṣḍar* is the equivalent by default of the infinitive. In this case, the translation makes no problem as the assertive modality induced by the infinitive is rendered by an equivalent uninflected verbal form, so no decision has to be made concerning person, gender and number agreement to choose the right flectional form.

In this section, we will list Arabic counterparts of the French infinitive according to its syntactic context. We will present the following equivalents: the *maṣḍar*, the completive clause introduced by *ʔan*, the completive clause introduced by *ʔanna*, the adjectival equivalent, the status clause and the finite verb.

3.1 Translated by a *maṣḍar* ($V_{inf} \equiv N_{Maṣḍar}$)

The *maṣḍar* presents the commonly used infinitive equivalent, wherever the infinitive functions

- as a verb heading a main clause (1a) or as a subordinated complement (1b-c):

- (1) a. A quoi bon **préparer** cet examen ? 'What's good in preparing this exam?'
 maa faaʔidatu **al-tahḍiiri**² li=haḍaa al-ʔimtiḥaani
 what utility the+preparation:Maṣdar for=this the-exam
- b. Elle doit **respecter** la loi 'She must respect the law'
 jaḍibu ʔalaj=haa **ʔihtiraamu** al-qaanuuni
 must.V on=her respecting:Maṣdar the-law
- c. Il a passé³ des heures à **jouer** 'He spent hours playing'
 ʔamḍaa Ø_{pronoun:subject} saaʔaati-n fii **al-laʕibi**
 he spent hours in the-playing:Maṣdar

- as a noun, fulfilling functions such as subject (2a), quasi subject (2b) and direct object (2c):

- (2) a. **Réussir** est mon but 'My goal is succeeding'
al-naḍḡaaḥu hadaf-ii⁴
 the-success:Maṣdar target-my
- b. Cela fatigue Alain **de courir**⁵ 'Running is exhausting Alain'
 jurhiqu **al-ḍarju** ʔalaan
 is exhausting the-running:Maṣdar Alain
- c. Je ne sais pas **nager** 'I don't know how to swim'
 laa ʔaʕrifu Ø_{pronoun:subject} **al-sibaahata**⁶
 Neg. I know the-swimming:Maṣdar

- as an adjective, fulfilling functions such as noun or adjective complement:

- (3) a. La fiche à identifier⁷ 'The form to identify'
 al-ʔistimaaratu al-waḍḡibu maʕrifatu=haa
 the-form the-obliged_to identifying:Maṣdar=it:PRO

² The deliberative infinitive in this example may also be translated by a completive clause, ʔan + Verb in the subjunctive marked with the 2nd singular masculine person: *maa faaʔidatu ʔan tuḥaḍira lihaḍaa al-ʔimtiḥaani*. But as we will see, this is not a systematic transfer: the verb is not always in the subjunctive mood and doesn't systematically agree with 2nd singular masculine person. PNG agreement may differ according to the speaker (the addressee by the direct discourse), the situational context and the usage.

³ This type of trivalent verbs accepts alternatively as equivalent a maṣdar or a verb in the present tense expressing progressivity. Therefore, the mentioned example can be translated as *ʔamḍaa saaʔaatin jalʕabu*. The verb is marked by a pronominal subject co-referent with the subject of the main verb.

⁴ Again switching to a completive clause is possible but the verb has to be inflected in the 1st singular person: *hadaf-ii ʔan ʔunḡaaḥa*. However, this commutation is not always possible, sometimes translating by a completive clause is not possible: **De voir** ça m'a bouleversé ≡ *ʔanza ʔaḍtu min ru ʔati haḍaa* ('I was upset by seeing that') | **ʔanza ʔaḍtu ʔan ʔaraa haḍaa*.

⁵ Several impersonal constructions conducting general values or expressing conative function (like advices, orders or prayers) accept as equivalent indiscriminately a maṣdar or a completive clause. The verb of the complement is marked with the 2nd masculine singular person or the 1st plural person:

Il est préférable d'être poli ≡ *mina almuḥaḍali ʔan takuuna muhaḍaban* | *altahḍiibu muḥaḍalun* 'It is preferable to be polite'

Il est dommage de fumer autant ≡ *mina almuḥzini altadxiinu* | *ʔan tudaxina bihaḍihi alʕaraahati* 'It is sad smoking that much'

⁶ In this example, the commutation with a completive clause is not possible, yet the infinitive may be translated by a verb in the present tense inflected with a person pronoun co-referent with the subject of the main verb, here, the 1st singular person: *laa ʔaʕrifu kajfa ʔbaḥu*.

⁷ We will not discuss the translation of the preposition à according to its numerous uses.

- b. Cet exercice est facile **à faire** 'This exercise is easy to do'
 haḏaa al-tamriinu Ø_{kaana} sahlun **ḥalu=hu**
 that the-exercise is easy doing:Maṣḍar=it:PRO

Although the infinitive can be translated by a maṣḍar, Arabic shows divergences in syntactic structure as well as word order constraints due to the particularity of the stative sentence governed by the copula *kaana*. The syntactic structure may be presented as follow:

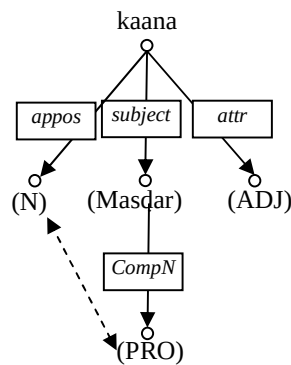


Figure 1: Surface Syntactic Structure of an Arabic copular clause

- as an adverb, fulfilling functions such as a circumstantial with a preposition:

- (4) a. Tu parles sans **réfléchir** 'You speak without thinking'
 ?inna=ka tataḥadaθu Ø_{pronoun:subject} duuna tafkiirin
 Assert=you you speak without thinking:Maṣḍar

- b. Sans entrer dans des détails, ne faites plus cela 'Without going through details, don't do that again'
 duuna al-duḫuuli fii al-tafaasili, laa taʿuud li=maa faʿalta
 without entering:Maṣḍar in the-details Neg you return to you do

The fact that the maṣḍar is the default equivalent of the infinitive doesn't mean that the same syntactic relations occur in both languages. These relations are language-specific and divergences in syntactic patterns are frequent. For example, the French quasi-subject can be promoted to be a subject in Arabic:

- (5) *Cela fatigue Alain de courir* α jurhiqu **alḏarju** ?alaan ('Running is exhausting Alan')

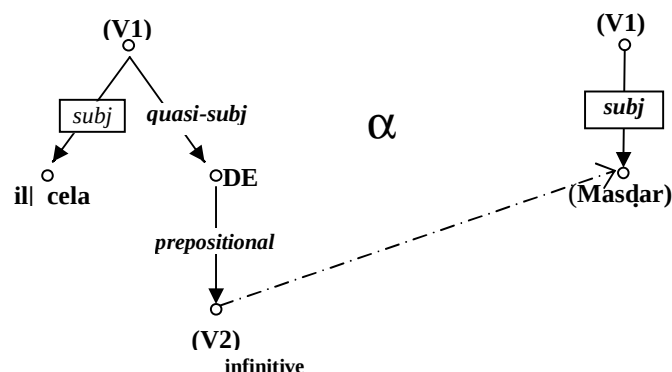


Figure 2: quasi-subject promoted to a subject in the Arabic structure

3.2 Translated by a completive clause introduced by ?an

(V_{inf} ≡ ?an–conjunctive→V_{subjunctive}–subject→PRO_{co-reference with main clause})

Translating an infinitive by the homologue grammeme, the maṣḍar, is not always appropriate, even though it may be grammatically correct. If in a context implying general injunctive modality, the maṣḍar can be successfully used as the counterpart of the infinitive, in case of a context implying injunctive value in a specific situation, the completive clause introduced by the complementizer ?an presents the equivalent commonly used. The subordinated verb is in the subjunctive and takes a pronominal subject. The choice of the appropriate pronoun is not obvious because the first syntactic actant of the infinitive verb is not always co-referent with the subject of the main verb; for example, in (6b) it is co-referent with the attribute and in (6c) with the direct object.

- (6) a. Elle doit **partir** α jadʒibu ʕalaj=haa **?an tarḥala** Ø_{PRO:subject} 'She must go'
- b. C'est pour moi un moment émouvant que **de me retrouver** à l'université α ?inna=haa la=lahzaton muʔaθiratun lii **?an ?atawaadʒadu** Ø_{pronoun:subject} bi=l-ɖaamiʕati 'It is an emotional moment to me to be at the university'
- c. Se voir sortir m'irrite α juzʕidʒunii **?an ?adʒida** Ø_{pronoun:subject} nafsii ʕaaridʒaton 'It is irritating me to be outside'

3.3 Translated by a completive clause introduced by ?anna

The embedded infinitive governed by a speech or perception verb can be translated also by a finite verb. The Arabic main verb must occur with the complementizer ?anna. The fact that in French the 1st syntactic actant of the main verb and that of the infinitive have the same referent resolves the PNG subject agreement, and the choice of tense is fixed as follows: past infinitive α past tense, present infinitive α present tense, cf. (7).

- (7) Ces poires paraissent avoir voyagé 'the pears seems to have travelled'
- jabduu **?anna haðihi al-kumeθra saafarat** Ø_{pronoun:subject}
seems that this the-pears it has travelled

3.4 Translated by a relative clause as adjectival equivalent

An infinitive modifying a noun can be translated by a relative clause (8). It is mainly the case of the prepositional phrase "à + V_{inf}". The transferring rule is as follow: {N–**Modification**→à–**Prepositional**→V_{inf}} ≡ {N–**Modification**→Relative:Connector–**Conjunction**→V_{present}}. The Arabic subordinated verb is in the present tense and takes a subject co-referent with the heading noun:

- (8) Vous êtes les premiers à le voir 'You are the first to see it'
- ?antum ?awalu **man juʕaahida=hu** Ø_{pronoun:subject}
You first who you see=it

Figure 3 shows the correspondence between the French structure and its Arabic equivalent:

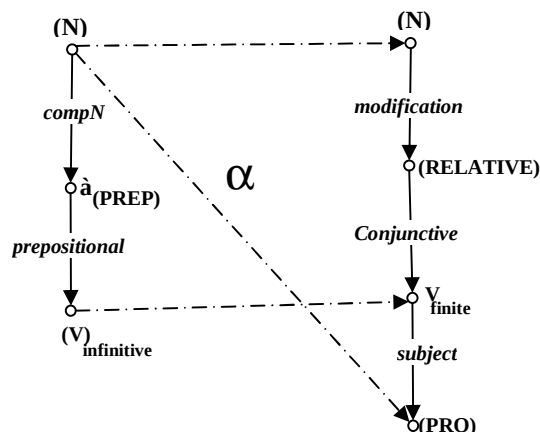


Figure 3 : The French infinitive translated into Arabic by a relative clause

3.5 Translated by a status clause

The embedded infinitive, in particular the *infinitivus cum Accusativo* construction, cf. (9a),⁸ may also be translated by a status clause (a coordinate clause introduced by the conjunction *wa* 'and' and acting as a modifier). The status clause has the specificity of being followed by a finite verb in the present tense and agreeing with a pronominal subject co-referent with the noun modified. This noun can be the subject of the infinitive clause (9a) or correspond to the first syntactic actant of the infinitive phrase fulfilling a circumstantial function (9b).

- (9) a. Nous avons regardé **la scène se dérouler** 'We watched the scene unfolding'
 ʃaahadnaa Ø_{pronoun:subject} al-ʔahdaaθu **wa hija** **taduuru**
 we watched the-events and it it is unfolding
- b. Le criminel a tué Jean **sans laisser** de traces 'The criminal killed John and didn't left evidence'
 qatala Ø_{pronoun:subject} al-mudgrimu ɖʒon **wa lam** **jatruka** **ʔaθarun**
 he killed the-criminel John and negation he left evidence

3.6 Translated by a finite verb

Translating the French infinitive into Arabic by a finite verb requires decisions concerning the tense and its agreement with a subject. This indeterminacy may occasionally entail resorting to linguistic or situational context. The Arabic counterpart can be a verb in the present, past or future tense. It can be also in the imperative or the passive. In this subsection, we will examine the different Arabic finite verb forms functioning as counterparts of the French infinitive.

– Translating the French infinitive by a verb in the present tense

The embedded infinitive can be translated by a verb in the present tense, when governed by a main verb expressing progressivity, cf. (1c). The Arabic pattern may present a paratactic construction, {V_{finite}→V_{finite}}, when governed by a verb of perception (10a), an inchoative or a continuative verb heading as oblique infinitival object⁹ the prepositional phrase "de + V_{infinitive}" or "à + V_{infinitive}" (10b). In

⁸ The *infinitives cum accusativo* construction or the *accusative plus infinitive* construction (A+I) involves a verb (in (9a) is verb *regarder*) followed by a noun phrase (*la scène*) and an infinitive (*se dérouler*). It can be rephrased by a sentence containing a complement clause (*Nous avons regarder la scène qui se déroule*).

⁹ In French, the infinitival oblique-objective syntactic relation is to be distinguished from the oblique-objective one, cf. (Iordanskaja & Mel'čuk, 2000). Correspondingly, to describe the paratactic relation between the main verb and the embedded

these cases the corresponding Arabic construction must be given in the government pattern of the verb. But the paratactic construction may also express a circumstantial value, for instance with a verb of movement as a main verb, cf. (10c). In the three cases, the 1st syntactic actant of the infinitive verb is co-referent either with the subject or the object of the main clause. Resolving this co-referential issue will help choosing the right inflectional form of the Arabic counterpart:

- (10) a. Pierre la vit tuer 'Pierre saw her killing [someone]'
 raʃa=haa Ø_{pronoun:subject} pjir taqtulu Ø_{pronoun:subject}
 he saw=her Pierre she is killing
- b. Les enfants ont commencé à dormir 'Children begin to sleep'
 badaʔa al-ʔawlaadu janaamuun. Ø_{pronoun:subject}
 start the-children they are sleeping
- c. Il court acheter des cigarettes 'He runs to buy cigarettes'
 ɖʒaraa Ø_{pronoun:subject} jaftarii Ø_{pronoun:subject} saɖʒaaʔirun'¹⁰
 he runs he buys cigarettes

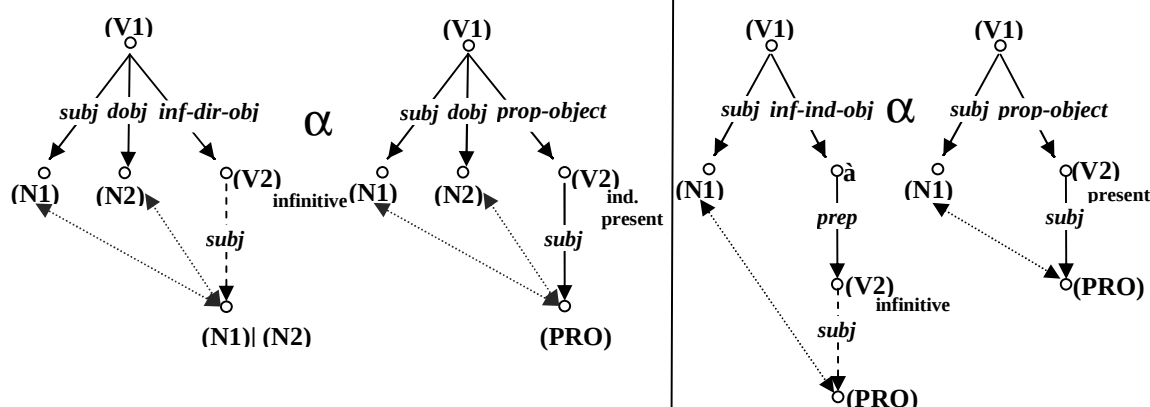


Figure 4: French infinitive translated by a verbal paratactic construction into Arabic

A verb in the present tense may also occur as the appropriate equivalent of the embedded indirect interrogative clause (11a) as well as the deliberative infinitive governing independent clause (11b):

- (11) a. Je ne sais plus où aller. 'I don't know where to go'
 laa ʃadrii Ø_{pronoun:subject} ʃajna ʃaɖhabu Ø_{pronoun:subject}
 Neg I know where I go
- b. Que faire ? 'What to do?'
 maaɖaa ʔafʃalu Ø_{pronoun:subject}
 what I do

In (11a), the co-referential link between the 1st syntactic actant of the main verb and the infinitive resolves the problem of choosing the pronominal subject in the corresponding subordinate clause. In (11b), the choice of the 1st masculine singular pronoun as the subject is justified since the speaker is the enunciator or the lecturer himself. But the decision is not always obvious: for instance, with an

finite one in Arabic, we distinguish a propositional objective relation. The propositional object may occasionally be substituted by a maʃdar or a preposition + maʃdar. As a result, we can say *badaʔa al ʔawlaadu alnawma* or *aɣaɖa al ʔawlaadu fii alnawmi*.

¹⁰ The subordinated clause may be translated by a circumstantial clause introduced by the subordinating conjunction *li* 'in order to'. Thus, we can say *ɖʒaraa li=jaftarii saɖʒaa ʔirun* and *ɖahaba li=juqabilu ʃamata=hu*.

(12) Il faudrait **savoir** où **aller** 'We should know where to go'
 janbaɣii ʔan naʃrifu Ø_{pronoun:subject} wiɖʒhatu=naa
 must that we know direction=our:Maşdar

(13) Toi, voter pour lui ! 'You vote for him!'
 ?anta tantaxiba=hu Ø_{pronoun:subject}!
 you you vote =him

(14) a. OÙ s'enfuir? 'where to flee'
 ʔajna al-mafarru? | ʔʔajna ʔafirru|nafirru?
 where the-escape:Maşdar where I escape| we escape

b. OÙ aller? 'Where to go?'
 ʔila ʔajna ʔaḏhabu | naḏhabu?
 to where I go | we go | ʔʔila ʔajna al-ḏihaabu?
 to where the-going:Maşdar

- Translating the French infinitive by a verb in the past tense

- **Translating the French infinitive by a verb in the future tense**

(15) Regarde, Maman, je **vais plonger**! α ʔunzurii yaa ʔumii **sawfa aɣtusu** 'look Mother, I will dive'

By examining parallel corpora, like cooking recipes and instructions in case of natural disasters, we found that the infinitive verb can be translated by an Arabic verb in the passive. We noticed that the infinitive verb can govern an independent clause. In this case, the direct object of the infinitive verb is

(16) a. **Cuire** la pâte lit. 'The dough is baked'

b. **Faire revenir** l'oignon dans l'huile lit. 'The onion is browned in oil'

- **Translating the French infinitive by a verb in the imperative**

(17) a. Ralentir α χ afif al-surʕata 'Slow down the car'

In the above contexts the translation by a *maṣḍar* is rejected even if it's grammatically correct: *?taxfiifu al-surṣati*, *?al-ḍaḡtu*, *al-raḍḡu*. In the next section, we will examine in more detail the infinitive governing an independent clause and fulfilling a conative function. We will see how the common use rejects translations that are grammatically corrects.

In French, as the context requires, a verb carrying injunctive value may take three forms: the instructions can be in the imperative (**Entourez** les adjectifs invariables en rouge 'Surround invariable adjectives in red'), in the infinitive (**Entourer** les adjectifs invariables en rouge) or in the future tense (**Vous entourerez** les adjectifs invariables en rouge). The infinitive can fulfill so a conative function, oriented toward the addressee. It expresses imperatives, directives and apostrophes such as orders, warnings and prayers. This infinitive is encountered in instructions of several types, e.g. manuals, recipes, advertisements, advices, administrative formalities and propaganda. It is used to assert that an action must be performed.

On the other hand, by exploring parallel corpora – mainly extracted from Egyptian and French newspapers and magazines, we see that Arabic tends to clarify the pragmatic modality of the infinitive by using a verbal form other than the *maṣḍar*, the default non-finite counterpart. The assertive modality in constructions where French systematically uses the infinitive is also rendered in Arabic by constructions other than the *maṣḍar*. The choice is based on standard use: a translation can be rejected even if it is grammatically correct. In such situations, the choice of a correct syntactic equivalent depends on the context. For example, the following infinitives require different equivalents:

- In all these examples, the infinitive expresses an injunctive modality within different types of texts. The choice of the appropriate Arabic equivalent is guided by the nature of the text itself. In the first example, the text is about instruction to do a gym exercise, the second is about administrative formalities, the third comes from a memento, the forth from a cooking recipe. The fifth and the sixth present

instructions about procedures to follow in case of an earthquake, and the two last ones are extracted from a job announcement. Any substitution between these counterparts may give a weird translation and will be unacceptable. Selecting the appropriate Arabic equivalent of the French infinitive entails so treating information concerning text profiles and situational context.

5 Conclusion

In the present article, we examined the transfer of the particularities of the French infinitive into Arabic. We focused on the translation of the infinitive expressing injunctive modality. We showed that a verb in the uninflected infinitive form can be translated by a *mašdar*, as an uninflected default counterpart, but it can be also translated by a finite verb. In this case, decisions must be taken concerning the appropriate mood and tense, as well as the right person, number and gender agreement. Resolving anaphoric relations within the text may help but in some contexts, we must refer to the text register or profile to take decision.

The idea behind this research is to demonstrate that grammatically correct translations can be rejected by the use in general. It is therefore necessary to present information concerning usage and situational context in order to get the right translation, this may be ontologically supported. A well formalized machine translation approach must handle this kind of data.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my gratitude to Igor Mel'čuk for his valuable comments on the preliminary version of this paper.

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