**How to use Google Translate to improve your Arabic writing**

You have heard it a thousand times: Google Translate does not work for Arabic writing.

If you have tried to use it yourself, you’ve discovered it’s true. Putting a large chunk of English text into Google Translate and then hitting the “translate” button into Arabic, will result in a bunch of (at best) incorrect Arabic, and at worst, a bunch of incomprehensible gobbledygook. Plus, it does nothing to help YOU learn to write correctly in Arabic.

But there IS a way to use Google Translate as a tool to improve your writing, or as a life line when there’s no one to help you at 2 AM and your assignment is due. Fresh from years of experience of needing help with Arabic at 2 AM, here are Mother Rebecca’s secret tips for how to use Google Translate to improve your Arabic writing (shh…. For your eyes only!).

The secret is that you have to work WITH Google Translate. You have to add YOUR Arabic grammar knowledge, to Google’s vast database of Arabic vocabulary. The vocabulary is often pretty trustworthy, it’s what happens to the grammar when no human being is involved in producing it, that is less than pretty.

So here’s what to do:

* Think about what you are trying to say.
* Do your best to write it in Arabic, without using Google Translate.
* When you get stuck because you don’t know a word, use Google Translate to look it up.

Just that one word.

* Now think about the nature of that word, and the role that it plays in your sentence.
  + Is it a noun? A verb? An adjective?

Let’s say you are trying to write

“His grandmother writes Arabic books.” And let’s say you are looking up the word “writes”.

Google Translate translates “writes” as يكتب

Can you trust that that means “SHE writes”? No you can’t. You have to do some grammar work first.

Ask yourself, what kind of word is “writes”.. it’s a VERB right?

And who is doing the action… his grandmother, a woman, right?

And how many people are we talking about, just one, correct?

So we know now that we need a verb in the **THIRD PERSON FEMININE SINGULAR** form.

You may have already learned the verb form for the third person feminine singular in class.

If not, don’t panic.. here’s how to find out what it is.

Use an online tool like this handy Arabic verb conjugator,

<http://www.verbix.com/languages/arabic.shtml>

And put in the letters for the root you are looking for.

K T B (from right to left, the Arabic way).

Then click go and you will be presented with a chart showing the verb conjugation:

<http://www.verbix.com/webverbix/Arabic/ktb%5Ba-a%5D%3AI.html>

In the far right column, scroll down till you find the row for the third person feminine singular (Sing 3f). Next ask yourself, does Grandma’s writing take place in the PAST (the perfect tense) or the PRESENT (the imperfect tense)? The PRESENT, you want to say she WRITES Arabic books. So look all the way across on that row to the space for the imperfect (present) tense, and you will see that it says:

تَكْتُبُ

If you try putting that into Google Translate to test it, to be sure it’s correct, all you will get is “writes”. So now, try putting “She writes” in English, into Google Translate. You will get some extraneous words that you did not ask for:

وقالت انها تكتب

Some of that is gobbledygook.. which is why you can’t JUST trust Google Translate with your precious homework assignment. BUT.. do you see your word in there, somewhere? Yes you do. Good enough! Ignore the extraneous words and just realize that تَكْتُبُ means “she writes”

Now you have to go through the same process of analysis with each other word…. Grandmother, books, etc. Is it a noun, a verb, an adjective? Is it singular or plural? What is its role in the sentence? What are the Arabic grammar rules that apply?

It can certainly be time consuming to go through this process, and I’ve provided an example that’s a bit exaggerated. But the point is, Google Translate CAN help you with your writing, just don’t rely on it as the last word. Instead, rely on it as the “first” word.. to give you the basic root of a word you don’t know, which you can then work with to tweak the grammar till you get it right.

Once you have your sentence figured out in Arabic, use Google Translate to make sure it really says what you meant. If your sentence came out as

جدته تكتب كتب عربية

put that into Google Translate and see how it comes out in English. Here too you can’t rely on Google as the last word, it’s just a tool to help you check your own perceptions. In this case Google says the sentence means “Grandmother writes Arabic books”.

I tried tweaking Google to get it to admit (c’mon, Google, fess up!) that جدته means HIS grandmother, but Google wouldn’t do it. I tried writing just grandmother جدة and Google did not recognize it.

In cases like this, you just have to rely on what you already know. You know that جد means Grandfather (and Google will admit that much). You know that you have to add ta marbuta ة to the word for Grandfather, to make it feminine so it means grandmother.

You know that the ta marbuta turns into a regular ta ت when another letter comes after it in the same word . You know that you have to add a ه to make it mean “his”. So you can be pretty sure that جدته means “his grandmother”.

If you still want more proof, try changing it to جدتي and see if Google will admit that that means “MY grandmother”. Why yes it does, thank you very much.

So now with your knowledge of Arabic grammar knowing that جدتي means MY grandmother and knowing that you must add a final ha ه to the end of a word to make it mean “HIS”.. you can be pretty sure you got it right.

I hope that this has given you some ideas about how Google Translate CAN help you, as well as about how it CAN’T. Can you rely on it blindly? No, absolutely not. You have to watch it like a hawk. But it can provide you with some basic vocabulary and also with some basic checks as to whether your writing is correct.

It’s useful to learn to apply these techniques because when you get farther along and write long complex paragraphs in Arabic, you are going to need to apply basically the same process to check those too.. one sentence and one word at a time. It’s a long slow process. But at least it gives you a starting point to work from, and a way to check your work once you’ve completed it….because sometimes, there’s no one BUT Google Translate around to help you at 2 AM.

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