

***Testing the Recognition of Aphoristic
Structures by Iraqi University Learners of
English***

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1. What is an Aphorism?

Lyons(1977:681) state that aphorisms contain truths (if they are truths) that are passed on, in all cultures, from generation to generation. Aphorism is a usually pithy and familiar statement expressing an observation or principle generally accepted as wise or true. It is , a statement of some general principle, expressing memorably by condensing much wisdom into few words.(via the net"1")

1. An artist never really finishes his work, he merely abandons it. (Paul Vale'ry)

The above sentence contains a wisdom presented in a proportional model expressing a fact about the artist.

2. A man can do what he wants, but not want what he wants.

A fact is expressed in few words, in the previous sentence, behind which much explanation and discussion might be drawn. The sentence is expressing one of the condensed

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facts about life which is the lack of ability of man to do or become what he wants.

Aphorism, short, pithy statement of an evident truth concerned with life or nature; distinguished from axiom because its truth is not capable of scientific demonstration.

(via the net"4"). Quirk et al(1985:843) state that the aphoristic sentence structure is found in many proverbs. The common structural feature is the balancing of two equivalent constructions against each other.

3. Mary at haste, repent at leisure.

In the preceding sentence, two balanced structures are produced in an aphoristic way.

2. Types of Aphoristic Structures

Gross(1987:viii) believes that an aphoristic structure is characterized by brevity, generalization and the fact that it must have an author to be differentiated from the proverb. However, aphoristic structures are mainly divided into aphoristic phrases and clauses.

2.1 Aphoristic Phrases

Quirk et al (1985: 443) adopt a way in classifying aphoristic structures into four types which are all balanced on a phrase level, as outlined in the following table:

Table-1-(Aphoristic Structures-Phrase Level)

I. The more, the merrier The less said, the better. The sooner, the better.	
II. Least said, soonest mended. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Once bitten, twice shy.	Easy come, easy go. Here today, gone tomorrow. First come, first served.
III. Spare the rod, and spoil the child. Marry at haste, repent at leisure.	Waste not, want not.
IV. More haste, less speed. No work, no money. Like father, like son.	In for a penny, in for a pound. Out of sight, out of mind. So far, so good.

Although Quirk et al(1985:838-843) call these aphoristic patterns as sentences, it might be argued that they have nothing to do with the English regular sentence pattern for their lack of the usual and grammatically acceptable elements, even if not all, found in the sentence i.e. subject, verb, object, complement,..... However, the argue adopted by Quirk et al(1985:544) is that these patterns are regarded as one of the realizations of irregular sentences in English. These patterns, aphoristic sentences, are all enlisted under the four types listed in table (1), as irregular sentence in English which fail to comply with the regular English sentence structure.

Biber et al(2000:224) consider structures like these as non-clausal material, while Downing and Locke (2002:12) undergo such combinations as minor clauses. The attribute of irregularity is found in all these types of aphoristic sentences which makes the reader count them as phrases not complete, usual sentences. The sets produced in the previous table are varied and of different origins and can be analyzed differently analyzed. The first set, Quirk et al (1985: 544) maintain, contains examples of cases which are regarded as elliptical to other more extended forms. The second set contains patterns being subordinated in structure with a non-finite verb. The relationship between the two elements is conditional. The third set contains imperative forms joined with the second part of the saying or aphorism in also a conditional relationship similar to the second set. The fourth set contains verbless sets different from all the other sets. Quirk et al (1985: 544) argue that this set has some new formations of the "no.....no....." model. A form of response which is found in some of the questions, for example:

4.I did not call her.

Response: **The more fool you!**

is treated as a realization of the fourth set. This response may be reduced further by omitting "the". So, "more fool you" is the resulting aphoristic form which is more similar to the form presented at the beginning of the set like "more haste,.....".

2.2 Aphoristic Sentences

Aphorism, which has been dealt with in the previous section as short phrases, is exemplified in English by a great number of complete regular sentences. In addition to the fact that they are given in the usual, full sentence patterns of English, they reflect a wide diversity in meaning and accordingly different topics or subject matters.

Gross(1987:ix) believes that it is too difficult to set out a clear base at which aphorisms to be divided on due to their wide range of subject matters. Aphoristic sentences in this respect vary from genre to genre depending on the side of wisdom or life, in general, they are directed to.(via the net "3")

2.2.1 Art and literature

Sentences in this respect are used to convey some ideologies concerning the most elevated use of language i.e. literature. Special writers, whether poets, novelists or critics, sayings are chosen. (Table"2")

Table -2-(Art and Literature)

5. In strong winds, even turkeys can fly.
6. Reading is equivalent to thinking with someone else's head instead of with one's own. (Arthur Schopenhauer)
7. When you have nothing to say, say nothing. (Charles Caleb Colton)
8. Never do today that which will become someone else's responsibility tomorrow.
9. To avoid criticism do nothing, say nothing, be nothing. (Elbert Hubbard)
10. I feel I am free but I know I am not.(Emile Cioran)
11. An object in possession seldom retains the same charm that it had in pursuit. (Gaius Plinius) (Via the net"2")

2.2.2. Altruism and Cynicism

This use of aphorisms reflects mainly two contradictory types of conducts and consequently "people", namely those who love others with real emotions and those who are hypocrite in dealing with others through bearing false emotions. The two incompatible concepts, i.e. altruism and cynicism are produced in a pithy way by some famous people. (Table"3")

Table -3-(Altruism and Cynicism)

12. Believe those who are seeking the truth. Doubt those who find it. (Andre Gide)
13. Honor has not to be won; it must only not be lost. (Arthur Schopenhauer)
14. Compassion is the basis of morality. (Arthur Schopenhauer)
15. Feeding the starving poor only increases their number. (Ben Bova)
16. The big thieves hang the little ones. (Czech Proverb)
17. The only truly affluent are those who do not want more than they have. (Erich Fromm)
18. Beware of the man who does not return your blow: he neither forgives you nor allows you to forgive yourself.
19. The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world. (George Bernard Shaw) (via the net"2")

2.2.3 Man and Woman

Different celebrities or even resources adopt some concept in producing the two kinds of human beings, mainly the compatibility between them. The two components of humanity are described and compared in the following examples. (Table"4")

Table -4- (Man and Woman)

20. A beautiful woman is a paradise to the eye and a curse to the purse.(Anonymous)
21. A man is incomplete until he is married. After that he is finished.
22. A woman's mind is cleaner than man's.....she changes it more often!!(Anonymous)
23. If you want to stay single....look for the perfect mate!
24. If you want your spouse to listen and pay strict attention to every word you say, talk in your sleep. (Anonymous)
25. Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outwards in the same direction. (Antoine de Saint-Exupery)
(Via the net"2")

2.2.4. Politics

Politics is one of the realms of aphorism, since packing a big wisdom into few words is a prominent feature of politicians. Such condensing is regarded as very effective and useful for those politicians to come or students of politics. (Table"5")

Table -5-(Politics)

26. You can get more with a kind word and a gun than you can with a kind word alone. (Al Capone)
27. Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear. (Ambrose Redmoon)
28. The only thing necessary for triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing. (Edmund Burke)
29. To fear is to die every minute.
30. The successful revolutionary is a statesman, the unsuccessful one a criminal. (Erich Fromm)
31. A government that robs Peter to pay Paul can always depend upon the support of Paul. (George Bernard Shaw) (Via the net"2")

2.2.5. Science

Identifying a general fact or a principle in science to be summarized in few words is regarded as very beneficent due to the fact that it is an outcome of a life experience. Although the case here is not giving fixed rules or theories, scientific sayings provide guidelines in science which might produce shortcuts for scientists. (Table"6")

Table -6- (Science)

32. Imagination is more important than knowledge. (Albert Einstein)
33. Technological progress is like an axe in the hands of a pathological criminal. (Albert Einstein)
34. Success is no proof about the quality of a work.(Alessandro Morandotti)
35. I will help you to approach if you approach, and to keep away if you keep away. (Antonio Porchia)
36. It is unbecoming for a young men to utter maxims. (Aristotle)
37. The fewer the facts, the stronger the opinion. (Arnold H. Glasow)
38. The road to success is always under construction. (Arnold Palmer)
39. If at first you do not succeed, remove all evident you ever tried. (David Brent)
40. It has yet to be proved that intelligence has survival value. (Arthur C. Clarke) (Via the net"2")

2.2.6. Society

Some of the phenomena in society can be observed by some writers or sociologists in an aphoristic frame as well, especially those who try to arrive at some of the defects and above all to identify some mistaken thoughts in society alongside with their remedies. (Table"7")

Table -7-(Society)

41. The time you enjoy wasting is not wasted time. (Bernard Russell)
42. It is stupid to blame a stupid person for not being more intelligent. (Bruno Cancellieri)
43. Any fool can criticize- and many of them do. (C. Garbett)
44. They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel. (Carl W. Buechner)
45. I feel I am free but I know I am not. (Emile Cioran)
46. The most violent element in society is ignorance. (Emma Goldman)
47. Don't give your children moral and religious instruction unless you are quite sure they will not take it too seriously. (George Bernard Shaw)
48. The more things a man is ashamed of, the more respectable he is. (George Bernard Shaw) (Via the net"2")

It is obvious that although different genres are there for aphorism, they all fall within one frame: i.e. the condensing of much knowledge or experience into few words. The diversity of specialization lead to the diversity of the outcomes all of which are endowed under the term aphoristic sentences.

It might be fair to state that, in terms of grammar, all the previous sub-sections contain full, regular sentences produced in a laconic mould. They are mostly proportional sentences produced, in contrast to the irregular model produced by Quirk et al(1985: 843), as complete clauses being balanced not

phrases. The touch of irregularity is completely abandoned in all these sentences. Furthermore, no unified pattern or type of sentences is there as they vary from a simple sentence to a complex sentence to a compound and even to a complex compound one as shown in all the previous tables.

3.1 The Test

To arrive at the degree of students mastering of the aphoristic structures discussed throughout the whole previous section, a test has been prepared and presented to students on two levels. The first level tries to discover the ability of Iraqi University learners of English to recognize the aphoristic phrases presented in the previous section. The second level of the test contains cases to be matched; which are forms of aphoristic sentences discussed in (2.2) with its sub-sections.

3.2 Procedure of the Test

The test was administered to a sample of (25) students. There was no male/ female distinction and students were exclusively third year students during the academic year 2010-2011. They had been firstly chosen based on the basis that they are supposed to have come across such anomalies compared with the ordinary sentence structure, which is the case of aphoristic phrases. Secondly, they had been treated as three year students of the English literature; a field of study which might be regarded as their own realm where they may notice or read aphoristic sentences. They were given the test form as an assignment after one of their lectures. They were given the

time they needed fully and no time limit had been set. They were only required to match between the elements in column A to column B depending on their own guess, "Appendix".

3.4 Results of the Test

The data obtained from the students has been analyzed according to the frequencies of the correct and incorrect answers.

1. On Phrase Level

Table -8- (Results-Phrase Level)

Phrase	Correct	Incorrect
1. Waste not, want not	09	16
2. Here today, gone tomorrow.	08	17
3. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.	10	15
4. Like father, like son.	22	03
5. Out of sight, out of mind.	17	08
6. First come, first served.	20	05
7. No work, no desert.	09	16

Testing the Recognition of Aphoristic Structures by Iraqi University Learners of English

Asst. Lect.. Oday Talal Najeeb

8. Easy come, easy go.	21	04
9. The sooner, the better.	12	13
10.The more, the merrier.	05	20
11.So far, so good.	12	13
12. No dinner, no desert.	08	17

2. On Clause Level

Table -9-(Results-Clause Level)

Clause	Correct	Incorrect
1. You can get more with a kind word and a gun than you can get with a kind word alone.	14	11
2. Success is no proof about the quality of a work.	08	17
3. A professional is someone who can do his best work when he doesn't feel like it.	07	18
4. Believe those who are seeking the truth. Doubt those who find it.	06	19

5. A beautiful woman is a paradise to the eye and a curse to the purse.	12	13
6. If you want to stay single...look for the perfect mate.	09	16
7. In strong winds, even turkeys can fly.	11	14
8. A child shows his toy, a man hides his.	08	17
9. Reading is equivalent to thinking with someone else's head instead of with one's own	12	13
10.Honor has not to be won, it must only not be lost.	09	16
11.Feeding the starving poor only increases their number.	10	15
12.It is stupid to blame a stupid person for not being more intelligent.	10	15
13.They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.	12	13
14.The successful revolutionary is a statesman, the unsuccessful one is a criminal.	14	11
15. A government that robs Peter to pay Paul can always depend upon the support of Paul.	16	09

Testing the Recognition of Aphoristic Structures by Iraqi University Learners of English

Asst. Lect.. Oday Talal Najeeb

16. Beware of the man who doesn't return your blow, he neither forgives you nor allows you to forgive yourself.	05	20
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3.4 Analysis of Results

Students' answers at the phrase level are mostly acceptable and approaching or many times above fifty percent except for five phrases. Phrases no: 1,2,7,10,12 are the only ones with percentages lower than 50%, i.e. varying 40% percent to 20%. Although aphorisms in their phrase level are supposed to be easier than the same structures on the clause level, this supposition has been quite evident for most of the phrases, but not for all of them. This might be traced back to the fact that these structures might be outside the realm of their former awareness and even usage of these structures.

On counting the percentages of students answers on the sentence level, a different situation is there. The test required students to identify these structures without alignment; a procedure that made the task easier for the subjects. The genre to which the sentences belong were also not arranged in the test by distributing all the six genre among all the sixteen choices in a haphazard way.

Sentences 1,14, 15, are of political content. Students chose the right choice in those sentences which can be regarded as the best, namely 59 percent. As a genre, politics has got the highest score achieved among all other genres. Although

students have no previous background in political expressions and sayings as far as academic topics are concerned, this high percentage might be traced back to other intervening reasons. Literature is regarded as the nearest field of study to politics among all other disciplines that students are dealing with. The supposition that students might make use of their background in literature in their treatment of these sentences might become evident. Another reason which might be considered in this respect is that students have interest in politics which they share with other classes in society as their common concern.

The second genre in terms of the scores arrived at is art. In sentences 7,9 students faced examples of aphorism containing some wisdom about art. Even though the score of correct answers is 46 % yet it is still lower than the acceptable level which is 50 %. This almost low or at best neutral score might be justified by the fact that art is their prior field of study along with the study of language.

Two genres scored 41 % as an average percentage, namely man and woman; society. These two types of aphoristic structures exemplified in sentences 5,6 for man and woman and sentences 8,12,13 for society have come third and fourth on the scale and regarded as low percentages. These two genres of aphorism seem to be quite vague for the subjects and far beyond their knowledge and consequently new for them. Although their names add nothing new for a student at the College of Arts, their content may not be familiar to them and utilizing these concepts in an aphoristic model may be far from their ordinary use of language.

Testing the Recognition of Aphoristic Structures by Iraqi University Learners of English

Asst. Lect.. Oday Talal Najeeb

The two lowest percentages of correct answers are the last two types of aphoristic structures, namely altruism and cynicism ; science with 30% correct answers for both. Subjects' choice of the sentences 4,10,11,16 reveal the fact that a few of them were able to match the correct matches. This is traced back to the fact that they have not dealt with any courses such as psychology or psycholinguistics that demand the use of such terms. Literature, which is regarded as their former background for achieving high scores compared with this one, i.e. altruism and cynicism; science, proved to be of no use in this genre of aphorism. Concerning science, students proved, through the low percentage scored for sentences 2,3, the belief that they have no former readings of scientific topics and that they avoid dealing with scientific truths or matters or even sayings due to the fact that they are students of arts and of different concerns compared with science.

Conclusion

Aphorism is a topic which indicates that a great deal of wisdom or experience or knowledge can be squeezed in few words. The use of the term in English in a variety of contexts and subject matters has led to its different types. Although aphorism is usually attached to literature, many celebrities have their own aphorisms which vary in subject matter following their own specialization.

It has been concluded throughout the research that aphorism is a vital topic for which no obvious class or rank or specialization of people are related or more clearly restricted

to. In most professions just like a scholar to a politician to sociologist to an archeologist to an anthropologist to an artist to a writer, special or recognized people have provided the people to come with a summary of experience or knowledge of their own field of interest with a small advice or wisdom in the form of an aphorism.

Throughout the test administered to the 3rd year students of English in the academic year 2010-2011, it has been concluded that aphorism causes a problem to them in terms of its identification. When students are faced with aphoristic structures, they mostly resort to their linguistic intuition to identify the correct choice. Although there is a convincing percentage of answers at the phrase level where the percentages are the highest, some phrases were still difficult to handle by subjects as the results show. The problem with subjects on the clause level, is of greater difficulty due to the fact that intuition alone cannot be considered as a decisive factor in identifying the correct match for the first part of the aphorism. The average percentage of correct answers on the clause level for all the types of aphoristic sentences does not exceed 41%. It might be justified to say that, in all the genres of aphoristic clauses, the percentage reflects an obvious drawback on the part of subjects to identify these clauses. The literature on aphorism in English tells us that different ideas from different trends are joined. The results of the test match what has been hypothesized, i.e. students are unfamiliar with aphoristic structures especially clauses regardless their production which counts as a much greater job for them.

Appendix

Match between the correct combinations in each one of the following pair of structures from column A to B by referring to numbers:

.....

1. Phrase level:

-A-

1. Waste not....
2. Here today....
3. Nothing ventured....
4. Like father.....
5. Out of sight....
6. First come....
7. Now work....
8. Easy come...
9. The sooner....
10. The more....
11. So far....
12. No dinner....

-B-

1. no money
 2. so good
 3. out of mind
 4. no desert
 5. the merrier
 6. easy go
 7. the better
 8. first served
 9. want not
 10. gone tomorrow
 11. nothing gained
 12. like son
-
-

2. Clause level:

-A-

1. You can get more with a kind word and a gun it

-B-

1. doubt those who find

- | | |
|---|---|
| 2. Success is no proof | 2. instead of one's own |
| 3. A professional is someone who can do his best work | 3. but they will never foret how you made them feel |
| 4. Believe those who are seeking the truth kind word alone | 4. than you can get with a |
| 5. A beautiful woman is a paradise to the eyes | 5. even turkeys can fly |
| 6. If you want to stay single feel like it | 6. when he does not |
| 7. In strong winds intelligent | 7. for not being more |
| 8. A child shows his toy work | 8. about the quality of a |
| 9. Reading is equivalent to thinking with someone else's head | 9. he neither forgives you nor allows you to forgive yourself |
| 10. Honor has not to be won lost | 10. it must only not be |
| 11. Feeding the starving poor purse | 11. and a curse to the |
| 12. It is stupid to blame a stupid person one a criminal | 12. the unsuccessful |
| 13. They may forget what you said mate | 13. look for the perfect |
| 14. The successful revolutionary is a statesman | 14. can always depend upon the support of Paul |
| 15. A government that robs Peter to pay Paul | 15. a man hides his |
| 16. Beware of the man who does not return your blow number | 16. only increases their |

اختبار مدى تمييز التراكيب المأثورة من قبل الطلبة العراقيين المتعلمين

للانجليزية في المستوى الجامعي

عدي طلال نجيب

المستخلص

يتناول البحث دراسة التراكيب المأثورة والتي هي نوع مخصوص سواء أكانت عبارات أم جمل تتضمن حكمة معينة أو نصيحة، ويشير مصطلح الأقوال بصورة عامة إلى تراكيب خاصة في اللغة الانجليزية تتضمن مقولة معينة أو مثل أو أي نوع من أنواع التراكيب مقدمة بأسلوب أنيق، ويتقدم البحث بفرضية مفادها أن الطلبة يواجهون صعوبة في التمييز بين جزئي التركيب ذو الطابع المأثور خاصة فيما يتعلق بالجمل وليس العبارات الموجزة، ويقع البحث في جزأين اثنتين. يحتوي الجزء الأول على تعاريف وإيضاحات بمصطلحي البحث؛ الأقوال والتراكيب المأثورة من الناحية النحوية، وتكمن مشكلة البحث في الأسئلة التالية:

- 1- هل يمكن اعتبار لطلبة اللغة الإنجليزية على معرفة بمصطلح "علم الأقوال" أم لا؟
- 2- هل لطلبة اللغة الإنجليزية المقدرة على اكتشاف بعض التراكيب المأثورة المرام اختبارهم بها في الامتحان؟ فالغرض من البحث هو إيجاد إجابات لتلك الأسئلة فضلاً عن صياغة قناعة مبنية على نتائج الاختبار؛ لذا ضُمّن البحث تحليل النتائج للوصول إلى أسباب الفشل إن وجدت .