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Review Article

Does Arabic have One or Two Main Basic Sentence Types?
A Descriptive Pedagogic Account

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Abstract

It is decided in this paper, on descriptive accounts, whether Modern Standard Arabic, henceforth, (MSA) has really one or two basic sentence types. All possible word orders found in MSA will be taken into account. The paper ends with suggesting one basic word order for MSA, and in fact classical Arabic. All other available orders will be accounted for by two concise simple movements. This account will be helpful to the teaching and learning of Arabic for natives and foreigners as well.

Introduction

Word order in MSA is a hotly debated issue among linguists [1,2]. What makes matter worse is that many modern Arab linguists do not agree with the traditionalists. It may be added to this, the views suggested by some none Arab linguists who add different other views. All these views will be scrutinized briefly in the following discussion. However, a reasonable start is to define MSA according to the current literature.

"The form of language which, through the Arab world from Iraq to Morocco, is found in the prose of books, newspapers, periodicals, and letters. This form is also employed in formal public address, over radio and television, and in religious ceremonial" [3].

Traditionally MSA, as classical Arabic, is said to have two main types of sentences: nominal (equational) sentence and verbal one:

"The sentence in Arabic is in two types and no third: a nominal sentence and a verbal one. … If the sentence starts with an original noun, then it is a nominal sentence, but if it starts with a none imperfect verb, then it is a verbal one" [4].

Original noun simply means a none moved DP, i.e., it is posted in its position prior to any movement, e.g. (1) starts with an original noun whereas (2) is not:

(1)   ᵓal-šams-u   mušriq at-un.

The sun-nom (is) shining-nom

The sun is shining.

(2)   Kitᾱba-an   katabt-u

A book-acc   wrote-I

A book I wrote.

Arab traditionalists do not consider (2) a nominal sentence because it does not start with an original noun because the "a book" is a moved DP (object) from post verbal position into a preverbal position. In fact it is a topicalized DP exactly like the English counterpart.

A verbal sentence, on the other hand, is the one which starts with a none imperfect verb, i.e. a perfect verb in Arabic, e.g.

(3)   Katab-a   ᵓal-ṭalib-u   risᾱlat-an

Wrote-3rd sing. masc.   the student-nom   a letter-acc.

The student wrote a letter.

Whereas a sentence as the following is not verbal:

(4)   Kᾱn-a   ᵓal-ṭalib-u   wᾱqif-ᾱn

Was   the student-3rd.sing.mas-nom   standing-acc.

The student was standing.

Arab traditionalists do not consider (4) a verbal sentence because it starts with an imperfect verb, i.e. "kᾱn-a".

Arabic Nominal Sentence

Nominal sentence in Arabic falls into two main types according to the grammatical tradition:

1. A Nominal sentence that consists of two nominative DPs.

This type is as in (1) above, and the following:

(5) ᵓal-fatɑ̄t-u ğamīlat-un

The girl-nom (is) beautiful-nom

The girl is beautiful.

The logic goes as follows: there are two DPs in the nominative. The first is nominative because it starts the sentence, and the second DP is assigned nominative by the first. There is a "be" as in the English counterpart. However, if (5) is put in the past, negative or future the copula will appear in Arabic as in English exactly:

(6)

(i) Kɑ̄nat-i ᵓal-fatɑ̄t-u ğamīlat-an (past)

was the girl-nom beautiful-acc.

The girl was beautiful.

(ii) Lam takən-i ᵓal-fatɑ̄t-u ᵓamīlat-an (negative)

Not was the girl-nom beautiful-acc.

The girl was not beautiful.

(iii) Sa-takūn-n ᵓal-fatɑ̄t-u ğamīlat-an (future)

Will -be the girl-nom beautiful-acc.

The girl will be beautiful.

If a solution can be found to this point, i.e. the zero copula in the present only, then this type of sentence in Arabic, which is considered basic, can be dispensed with, and this type will be considered a subtype of the verbal sentence in Arabic. This point will be dealt with shortly.

2. Nominal sentence that starts with a nominative DP and its predicate is a whole verbal sentence.

This type is found in sentences as follows:

(7) ᵓal-ṭulɑ̄b-u katab-ū ᵓal-risɑ̄lat-a

The students 3ʳᵈ pl. masc. wrote- clitic-they the letter-acc.

The students wrote the letter.

(Lit: The students, they [the students] wrote the letter).

It is noticed that in the normal translation there is just one DP which is the subject; and this translation would be identical to (8):

(8) Katab-a ᵓal-ṭulɑ̄b-u ᵓal-risɑ̄lat-a

Wrote the-students-3ʳᵈ sing.pl. the letter.

The students wrote the letter.

whereas in the grammatical translation, there is a DP subject and then a pronoun (PRO) that refers to the same preceding DP (antecedent) that functions as a subject of the predicate sentence. This point should be dealt with in any convincing analysis of word order in Arabic. However, some consider (7) as a topic comment structure [5]. Similar suggestions, which we do not agree with as will be clear in the coming discussion, are found in:

"The evidence seems clear, however, that we can safely call this construction Topic-Comment, as it consists of a topicalized, presupposed Subject followed by a predicate Comment that is comprised of new (non-given) information" [6].

The Verbal Sentence in Arabic

A verbal sentence in Arabic is like the English one, i.e. there are transitive as well as intransitive sentences but with different word order:

(8)

(i) nɑ̄m-a ᵓal-walad-u

Slept-3ʳᵈ. sing. mas. the boy-nom.

The boy slept.

(ii) ᵓakal-a ᵓal-walad-u tufɑ̄ḥat-an

Ate-3ʳᵈ. sing. mas. the boy-nom an apple-acc.

The boy ate an apple.

(iii) Kasɑ̄ ᵓal -rağul-u ᵓal-walad-a qamīṣ-aan

Dressed- 3ʳᵈ sing. mas. the man-nom the boy-acc. a shirt.acc.

The man dressed the boy a shirt.

Basic word order in Arabic is discussed in the following sections; and an attempt is done to collapse all the apparent different word orders into one.

Arabic Basic Word order

There are many suggestions about Arabic basic word order in the literature. Basically the contest is between two main suggestions: Arabic is VSO or SVO. A third smaller suggestion is that Arabic is VOS. For an extensive analysis see: [7] and [8].

A sample that represents all the basic actual available word orders in MAS is the following:

(9)

(i) Katab-a   ᶜal-ṭulāb-u   ᶜal-kitāb-a (VSO)

     wrote   the- students-nom   the book-acc.

     The students wrote the book.

(ii) katab-a   ᶜal-kitāb-a   ᶜal-ṭulāb-u (VOS)

     wrote   a book-acc.   the students-nom.

     The students wrote the book.

(iii) ᶜal-kitāb-a   katab-a   ᶜal-ṭulāb-u (OVS)

     The book-acc.   wrote   the students-nom.

     The book the students wrote.

(iv) ᶜal-ṭulāb-u   katab-ū   ᶜal-kitab-a (SV+clitic-nom+O)

 The students-nom   wrote-they   the book-acc.

     The students wrote the book. (Lit: the students -they wrote the book).

(v) ᶜal-kitāb-u   katab-hu   ᶜal-ṭulāb-u (OV+clitic-acc.+S)

The book-nom   wrote-it.acc.   the students-nom.

     The students wrote the book. (Lit: the book -wrote it the students).

Five different word orders are present in (9). The difference between (9.i) and (9.ii) is the different positions of the subject and the object in post verbal position. This can be handled neatly by one kind of movement. However, (9.iii) seems to be a topicalized structure because the preverbal DP keeps its case and θ-role exactly like the English counterpart. However, (9.iv) and (9.v) pose a problem: the first starts with the subject but there is a clitic like pronoun on the inflectional ending of the verb that has the same θ-role of the preverbal DP and the same case i.e. nominative. (9.v) poses a more serious problem: the preverbal DP is in the nominative and has the same θ-role of its clitic as in (9.iv) but the clitic/resumptive pronoun on the verb is in the accusative and not the nominative as in (9.iv).Any serious analysis of word order in Arabic should take all these observations into considerations.

To handle the difference between (9.i) and (9.ii), it will be assumed that MSA, as classical Arabic, allows for the interchange between subject and object in post verbal position. The rich inflection of case system will ensure that there will not be any mixing or ambiguity between the subject and the object regardless of their positions in post verbal position because the subject is always nominative (u-ending) and the object is always accusative (a-ending).

The real question is (9iv) and (9.v). In addition to the preverbal moved DP, there is a clitic like pronoun on the inflectional ending of the verb. Why is not there a clitic on the inflectional ending of the verb in (9iii) on the same grounds? Is not the DP ᶜal-kitāb-a a moved DP into a preverbal position?

It will be assumed that in (9iv) and (9.v) there is a movement but it is different from that in (9iii). It will be assumed that there are two types of movements in Arabic:

(10)

(i) Movement at the morphophonemic level

It is a movement that changes places between subject and object in post-verbal position. This movement might be carried for semantic purposes and the subject and the object keep their cases and θ-roles. This movement covers also (9.iii), the topiclalized sentence as the preverbal DP (object) keeps its case and θ-role.

(ii) Movement at the syntactic level

It is a movement that moves a DP from post-verbal position into preverbal position, and it triggers a clitic like pronoun in its original position that is co-indexed with the preverbal position for θ-role, but with a different case, i.e. the case of the preverbal moved DP is always nominative whereas the case of the clitic it triggers is either nominative or accusative depending on the moved DP: if it is the object of the sentence, then the clitic will be accusative, but if the moved DP is the subject, the clitic will be nominative.

These two simple movements will cover all the available word orders in MSA except the nominal sentence that consists of two DPs in the nominative. A solution will be suggested at the end of the paper.

Both (9.iv) and (9.v) are considered nominal sentences in the traditional analysis or topic comment structures according to some Western linguists (see: footnotes 5, and 8 before); however, as has been shown, both can be considered verbal sentences but with a moved DP in the syntax as suggested in (10.ii). If this suggestion is valid, which we believe it to be so, then one type of nominal sentence is subsumed under the verbal sentence.

A remarkable and interesting feature that distinguishes (9.iv) and (9.v) from the topiclaized (9.iii) is that in both (9.iv) and (9.v) the preverbal nominative DPs can be deleted and the sentences are still correct in MSA:

(11)

(i) katab-ū   ᶜal-kitāb-a

     Wrote-they   the book-acc.

     They wrote the book. (Lit: wrote-they the book)

(ii) katab-hu   ᶜal-ṭulāb-u

     wrote-it.acc.   the students-nom.

The students wrote it. (Lit: Wrote-it the students)

Whereas if the topicalized DP in (9.iii) is deleted, the sentence becomes ungrammatical:

*(12) katab-a ꜥal-ṭulāb-u

wrote the students-nom.

*the students wrote….

The Structure in (12) is ungrammatical because there is no object of the transitive verb neither in its original post-verbal position as in (9.i) and (9.ii) nor in preverbal position as in (9iii). But why are (11.i) and (11.ii) grammatical and interpretable? The answer is that the deleted preverbal moved DPs in both sentences have triggered in their original place clitics like pronouns that denote the gender, number and case of the deleted DP, so these elements make the interpretation at LF level possible; whereas (12), the topicalized structure, lacks all these elements

What is left is the nominal sentence that consists of two nominative DPs in the present tense. If the assumption held in this paper that MSA allows for zero "copula" in the present tense only as a language specific property, then all different word orders will be collapsed into one basic word order which is verb initial. MSA is not the only language in the world that allows zero copula in the present. In fact there are many other languages which have zero copula including Turkish, Japanese, Ukrainian, Russian, Hungarian, Berber amongst many [9] others. An example from Russian will suffice:

(13) Moskva gorod

Moscow city

Moscow is a city.

In fact, the Russian copula structures are like the Arabic ones exactly i.e. the copula is omitted in the present but appears in the past or the future.

(14)

(i) Она дома (Ona doma, "She at home"), literally "She is now at home, in the house"

(ii) Она была дома (Ona byla doma, "She was at home") [10].

The question now is not whether MSA is VOS or VSO but whether Arabic is verb initial or subject initial.

It is believed in this paper that MSA is a verb initial language as the interchange between the subject and the object in post-verbal position is optional on the morphophonemic level because the DPs in post-verbal positions do not change their cases or θ-roles.

However, some linguists suggested that MSA is an SVO [11] on the basis of sentences as in (9.iv) and (9.v) because these sentences start with a DP in the nominative which they considered to be the real subject of the sentence; and these same structures, in fact, led some others to consider such structures as topic comment structures; yet these same structures are considered also nominal sentences for traditionalists because they start with a DP. However, if these structures are considered verbal sentences, as has been shown before, but have gone a preverbal movement on the syntactic level, and because the clitic on the ending of the verb denotes that such structures have gone at least one movement because clitics are [12]:

(15) "I assume that clitics are the spelling out of case feature" then we have one basic order for MSA which is Verb initial.

then there is just one basic order for MSA which is verb initial.

A remaining question that begs an answer is the following: if MSA is a verb initial language, then how can it be decided whether it is a VSO or VOS?

The answer might be decided structurally i.e. if it is assumed that adjacency is a prerequisite for case assignment, and that a DP should be governed and be adjacent to a case assigner (in transitive verb structures or prepositional phrases etc…), then MSA could be considered a VOS language at the D-structure and all the other available orders can be derived through two basic and simple movements as outlined above.

Conclusion

Hopefully, It has be shown that MSA, as in fact classical Arabic, enjoys one basic word order which could be VOS according to all the evidence available. All other available basic word orders can be derived smoothly through two neat movements, without any need to any ad hoc or very complicated rules. It is believed this will be helpful in the teaching and learning of MSA as learners have to understand one basic order, and then can derive all other possible orders through two very neat and precise movements; rather than muddling in the large available word orders on the surface structure.

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