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Issues in the syntax of Arabic

1.1 The Arabic language(s)

Arabic belongs to the Semitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic (Hamito-Semitic) family of languages, which includes languages like Aramaic, Ethiopian, South Arabian, Syriac, and Hebrew. A number of the languages in this group are spoken in the Middle East, the Arabian Peninsula, and Africa. It has been documented that Arabic spread with the Islamic conquests from the Arabian Peninsula and within a few decades, it spread over a wide territory across North Africa and the Middle East. Arabic is now spoken by more than 200 million speakers excluding bilingual speakers (Gordon 2005).

Although there is a debate about the history of Arabic (including that of the Standard variety and the spoken dialects) Arabic displays some of the typical characteristics of Semitic languages: root-pattern morphology, broken plurals in nouns, emphatic and glottalized consonants, and a verbal system with prefix and suffix conjugation.

1.1.1 *The development of Arabic*

Classical Arabic evolved from the standardization of the language of the Qur'an and poetry. This standardization became necessary at the time when Arabic became the language of an empire, with the Islamic expansion starting in the seventh century. In addition to Classical Arabic, there were regional spoken Arabic varieties. It is a matter of intense debate what the nature of the historical relation between Classical Arabic and the spoken dialects is (Owens 2007).

Modern Standard Arabic emerged in the nineteenth century at a time when Arabic was gaining the status of official language in the Arab world, and coinciding with the emergence of Arab nationalism (see Suleiman (2003) and references therein). The process of modernization of the language started in the early twentieth century with Arab academies playing a crucial role in "preserving" the Arabic

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language from dialectal and foreign influence, and adapting it to the needs of modern times. Unsurprisingly, in spite of the unifying work of those academies, one can still observe regional variations in Modern Standard Arabic.

1.1.2 *The Modern Arabic dialects and Modern Standard Arabic*

The linguistic space of the Arabic-speaking world, which spans a large geographical area from the Persian Gulf in Asia to the Atlantic Ocean in North West Africa, is shared by several language varieties, which include Modern Standard Arabic, and a number of Arabic vernaculars that remain mainly as spoken dialects. Those dialects differ from one another, with mutual intelligibility decreasing as the geographical distance between them increases. The main geographical linguistic groupings are the Maghreb (mainly North Africa), Egypt, the Levant, and the Gulf.¹ Modern Standard Arabic and the spoken dialects of Arabic exist in a diglossic situation (Ferguson 1959): the Arabic vernaculars are what people acquire at home, and thus, they are the native languages of the people in the Arab world. Modern Standard Arabic is the language for writing and for formal speaking and is only acquired at school. Thus, not all speakers of Arabic have equal command of the Standard dialect and their colloquial dialect. Language choice in the Arab world is not only determined by the factors that influence the functional distribution of the various Arabic varieties; it also has a political association, since Modern Standard Arabic has become a symbol of the unity of the Arab world (Suleiman 2003).

1.2 General characteristics of the syntax of Arabic

In this brief introduction to the sociology of Arabic we highlighted the complex relationships that exist between Modern Standard Arabic and the various Arabic vernaculars. This complexity can also be found in the variation observed between the grammars of the different Arabic varieties. In this book, we focus mainly on the description of grammatical structures in Standard Arabic, Moroccan Arabic, and Lebanese Arabic. However, to illustrate the range of variation that exists, we also use data from Egyptian Arabic, Palestinian Arabic, and the Gulf varieties.

¹ There are also Arabic-speaking minorities in Sub-Saharan Africa (particularly Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria) and Asia (Afghanistan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan) (see Versteegh 1997: chapter 13).

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1.2 General characteristics of the syntax of Arabic 3

In the sections that follow, we introduce the key empirical generalizations that characterize the syntax of the various Arabic dialects under consideration, and which we develop in the present book, taking into consideration previous work in the area.²

1.2.1 *The syntax of the A-domain*1.2.1.1 **Clause structure**

There are a number of issues that arise in the context of Arabic clauses. The first issue concerns the structure of the clause, particularly the categories, such as tense and negation, that occupy the space between the complementizers and the lexical predicates – the so-called A-domain. For example, it has traditionally been claimed that Arabic verbs carry aspectual or temporal morphology which is realized through verbal templates and agreement morphology. Thus, in the present tense, the verb in Standard Arabic may display a specific vocalic melody and discontinuous agreement (1a) while in the past tense it may display a different vocalic melody and suffixal agreement (1b).

- (1) a. ya-ktub-na
 3-write-fp
 ‘They are writing.’
 b. katab-na
 wrote-3fp
 ‘They wrote.’

The question we ask is whether tense (or aspect) is realized through the vocalic melodies or as part of the agreement morphology. To provide an adequate answer to this problem we must go beyond Standard Arabic to see how the dialects realize tense, and what role, if any, vocalic melodies play. The data that will be presented and discussed in chapter 2 suggest that tense in Arabic may not be realized through vocalic melodies or as part of the agreement morphology. This in turn raises the question of whether there is an abstract tense element/projection in the Arabic clause. Evidence from Case, temporal adverbs, and tensed negatives provide syntactic support for such a projection.

A related question that arises in the context of simple clauses concerns the structure of the so-called verbless sentences and whether they contain a null VP constituent (2).

² In this book we will deal only with the sentential syntax of Modern Standard Arabic and other Arabic varieties. Thus, we do not include a discussion of the Construct State and the syntax of DPs.

(2) ʔal-kitaab-u žadiid-un
the-book-Nom new-Nom
'The book is new.'

1.2.1.2 Subjects and subject positions

(3) SVO

a. ʕomar kla t-təffaaħa Moroccan Arabic
Omar ate.3ms the-apple
'Omar ate the apple.'

b. ʔəħmad gaabal mona Palestinian Arabic
Ahmed met.3ms Mona
'Ahmed met Mona.'

(4) VSO

a. kla ʕomar t-təffaaħa Moroccan Arabic
ate.3ms Omar the-apple
'Omar ate the apple.'

b. gaabal ʔəħmad mona Palestinian Arabic
met.3ms Ahmed Mona
'Ahmed met Mona.'

Chapter 3 takes up the discussion of subject positions in various Arabic varieties in detail. Contra proposals that have argued that the postverbal subject is in the specifier of the VP projection, we will discuss data that suggest that it is outside

the VP. With regard to the preverbal subject, we will review the arguments which state that it behaves as a topic (see also chapter 8 of this book).

1.2.1.3 Agreement and agreement asymmetries

Standard Arabic is well known for its agreement asymmetries whereby the subject partially agrees with the verb under the VS order (5a) but fully agrees with it under the SV order (5b).

- (5) a. ?akal-**at** l-muʕallimaat-u
 ate-3fs the-teacher.fp-Nom
 ‘The teachers ate.’
- b. l-muʕallimaat-u ?akal-**na**
 the-teacher.fp-Nom ate-3fp
 ‘The teachers ate.’

The third issue we take up is the analysis of the agreement phenomena in Arabic. Various syntactic alternatives have been explored in the literature, but are shown to have fallen short of accounting for the full range of data. We will explore alternative ways of deriving the asymmetry from the interface of syntax and morpho-phonology.

Another intriguing agreement asymmetry concerns first conjunct agreement in coordination structures whereby the verb agrees with the first conjunct in the VS order but must agree with the full conjunct in the SV order. Moreover, number sensitive items seem to force full conjunct agreement in the VS order. The full set of facts will be discussed, as well as possible analyses, including a biclausal account for close conjunct agreement.

1.2.1.4 The syntax of sentential negation

The fourth issue we discuss within the Arabic simple clause is sentential negation, which presents a complex problem in Arabic syntax. In Standard Arabic, there are five main negative particles that realize sentential negation. Two of these particles, *lam* and *lan*, also carry temporal information (6).

- (6) a. T-Tullaab-u lam ya-drus-uu *Standard Arabic*
 the-students-Nom Neg.past 3-study-mp
 ‘The students did not study.’
- b. T-Tullab-u lan ya-drus-uu
 the-students-Nom Neg.fut 3-study-mp
 ‘The students will not study.’

laa, by contrast, occurs only in imperatives and present tense sentences with verbal predicates.

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- (7) a. T-Tullab-u **laa** ya-drus-uu-n *Standard Arabic*
 the-students-Nom Neg 3-study-mp-ind
 ‘The students do not study.’
 b. laa ta-drus
 Neg 2-study
 ‘Do not study!’

Another negative particle, *laysa*, occurs only in present tense sentences, accompanying verbal predicates as well as non-verbal predicates. However, unlike the other negatives, it carries agreement morphology.

- (8) laysat fii l-bayt-i
 Neg.3fs in the-house-Gen
 ‘She is not in the house.’

The fact that negation can carry temporal information and agreement morphology argues for its head status and also, possibly, for locating it between the tense projection and the verbal projection.

On the other hand, in the spoken dialects, there are usually only two forms of negation whose distribution is also restricted by the tense of the clause and the category of the predicate. Though the spoken dialects and Standard Arabic differ in their negative particle inventories, the underlying syntax turns out to be similar in that the conditions that regulate the distribution of sentential negation in Standard Arabic also regulate its distribution in the spoken dialects. The main difference is that in Standard Arabic the negatives can carry temporal information but they cannot do so in the spoken dialects.

Another important aspect of sentential negation concerns the dependencies it enters into with negative polarity items and negative quantifiers. The NPI *ħədd* in Moroccan Arabic in (9) is restricted to the post-negative position. But another NPI, *ħətta+NP*, can occur in both the pre-negative and post-negative positions (10).

- (9) a. ma-ža ħədd
 Neg-came.3ms one
 ‘No one came.’
 b. *ħədd ma-ža
 one Neg-came.3ms
- (10) a. **ma**-ža ħətta wəħəd
 Neg-came.3ms even one
 ‘No one came.’

- b. hætta wahəd **ma-ža**
 even one Neg-came.3ms
 ‘No one came.’

Word order, and more intriguingly, the category type of the negative polarity items are critical to the distribution of those elements.

1.2.2 The syntax of the A'-domain: unbounded dependencies in Arabic

The various Arabic varieties under consideration make use of several strategies for forming unbounded dependencies between a sentence or clause peripheral element and a sentence internal position. In parallel with the canonical unbounded dependency between a peripheral element and a gap in a sentence internal position, certain constructions exhibit a phenomenon called *resumption*, where the sentence internal position to which the peripheral element is related is occupied by an overtly realized anaphoric element, called a *resumptive*.³ Most

³ It is generally pronouns that serve as resumptive elements (see McCloskey 2002, 2005); although, it has been observed that certain noun phrases, like epithets, can also occur as resumptives, as illustrated in the Lebanese Arabic example in (i) (see McCloskey 1990; Shlonsky 1992; Aoun and Choueiri 2000; Aoun, Choueiri, and Hornstein 2001):

- (i) ħkii-na maʕ l-bint lli ʔaal-o ʔanno ha-l-mʕattara ħa-təSʔut
 talked-1p with-the-girl that said-3p that this-the-poor Fut.-fail.3fs
 ‘We spoke with the girl whom they said that this poor one will fail.’

In addition, there is variability among the Arabic dialects as to whether they allow strong pronouns as resumptive elements. Whereas in Moroccan Arabic strong pronouns are excluded from the contexts of resumption, Lebanese Arabic strong pronouns are not. Ouhalla (2001) provides relevant examples from Moroccan Arabic to illustrate this point ((iia–b) correspond to Ouhalla’s (21a–b)).

- (ii) a. šmen Talib nsiti fin tlaqiti-h (*huwwa)
 which student forgot-2s where met-2s-him (HIM)
 ‘Which student have you forgotten where you met?’
 b. šmen Talib saferti qblma yTerdu-h (*huwwa)
 which student traveled-2s before expelled-3p-him (HIM)
 ‘Which student did you travel before they expelled?’

The sentences in (ii) contrast with their equivalents in Lebanese Arabic, where the sentence initial wh-phrase can bind the strong resumptive pronoun (iii).

- (iii) a. ʔayya tilmiiz nsiit-e ween ltaʔay-te fi-i huwwe
 which student forgot-2fs where met-2fs in-him HIM
 ‘Which student did you forget where you met?’
 b. ʔayya tilmiiz seefar-te ʔablma yišhaT-u -u huwwe
 which student traveled-2fs before expelled-3p him (HIM)
 ‘Which student did you travel before they expelled?’

In all Arabic dialects, weak pronouns can be used productively as resumptive elements, and in this book we discuss only weak pronouns as resumptive elements.

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Arabic dialects make productive use of the resumptive strategy, in parallel with the gap strategy.

One of the main questions that can be raised in that regard is: why do languages make use of more than one strategy to construct unbounded dependencies? In order to answer such a question, one needs to understand the properties of the gap strategy and those of the resumptive strategy and how the gap strategy and the resumptive strategy are related cross-linguistically and within a given Arabic variety.

1.2.2.1 Wh-interrogatives

Wh-interrogatives display the richest repertoire of strategies in forming unbounded dependencies. Thus, the various Arabic varieties make use of up to four different strategies in forming wh-questions: the gap strategy, the resumptive strategy, the Class II resumptive strategy, and the wh-in-situ strategy. Whereas in the gap strategy the variable position corresponds to an empty position inside the sentence, in both the resumptive strategy and the Class II resumptive strategy, it is occupied by a pronominal element. The in situ strategy involves a wh-constituent in the variable position inside the sentence.

Lebanese Arabic, for instance, makes use of all four strategies, as exemplified in (11):

- (11) a. ?ayya mmasil šəft Ø b-l-maTʕam? *Gap Strategy*
 which actor saw.2ms in-the-restaurant
 ‘Which actor did you see in the restaurant?’
- b. ?ayya mmasil šəft-o b-l-maTʕam? *Resumptive Strategy*
 which actor saw.2ms-him in-the-restaurant
 ‘Which actor did you see in the restaurant?’
- c. miin (ya)lli šəft-o b-l-maTʕam? *Class II Resumptive Strategy*
 who that saw.2ms-him in-the-restaurant
 ‘Who is it that you saw in the restaurant?’
- d. šəft ?ayya mmasil b-l-maTʕam? *In-situ Strategy*
 saw.2ms which actor in-the-restaurant
 ‘Which actor did you see in the restaurant?’

The wh-in-situ strategy is not available in Standard Arabic; the gap strategy doesn’t seem to be available in Egyptian Arabic. However, each of the Arabic varieties under consideration seems to make use of at least two different strategies in forming its wh-interrogatives.

Table 1.1 *Wh-phrases that can be related to a resumptive*

Resumptive elements	
Yes	No
<i>ʔayy(a) NP</i> ‘which NP’, <i>miin/man</i> ‘who’	<i>šu/maaḏaa</i> ‘what,’ <i>kam NP</i> ‘how many NP,’ <i>ʔaddee(š)</i> ‘how much,’ <i>ween/ʔayna</i> ‘where,’ <i>ʔeemta/mataa</i> ‘when,’ <i>kiif/kayfa</i> ‘how,’ <i>lee(š)/limaaḏaa</i> ‘why’

The different strategies impose different restrictions on (i) the type of wh-phrase that can be involved, and (ii) the distribution of the “variable” position within the sentence. The gap in wh-interrogatives can occur in simplex and complex sentences, but it is prohibited inside islands. The pronoun, whether in resumptive wh-interrogatives or Class II resumptive interrogatives, can occur in all contexts, including islands. Wh-in-situ elements can occur in simplex and complex sentences.⁴

There has been much discussion on the relation between the availability of a given strategy for forming wh-interrogatives and the nature of the wh-constituent involved. Thus it has been argued that, whereas all wh-constituents may be related to a gap in a wh-question, only a subset of those can be related to a pronominal in a resumptive wh-question. In Lebanese Arabic, this is illustrated in Table 1.1.

We will argue that the notions of referentiality/d-linking, however understood, are inadequate to characterize the set of wh-constituents which can form unbounded dependencies with a pronominal element. This is further complicated by the fact that within Lebanese Arabic, the same wh-constituent, namely *šu* ‘what,’ is prohibited in resumptive wh-interrogatives, but not in Class II resumptive wh-interrogatives.

The nature of the wh-constituent which occurs in the in situ strategy varies across the Arabic dialects. Whereas in Egyptian Arabic all wh-constituents may occur in situ, in Lebanese Arabic only a subset of those can occur in situ. The subset of wh-constituents which occur in situ in Lebanese Arabic does not coincide with that of those which occur in resumptive wh-interrogatives. Thus, *kam NP* ‘how many NP,’ which cannot occur in a resumptive wh-question (12a), can occur in situ (12b).

- (12) *Lebanese Arabic*
a. **kam kteeb ʔəryuw-un t-tleemiz?*
how many book read.3p-them the-students
‘How many books did the students read?’

⁴ There is not much discussion in the literature on Arabic on the wh-in-situ strategy in island contexts.

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- b. ʔəryo t-tleemiz kam kteeb?
 read.3p the-students how many book
 ‘How many books did the students read?’

In chapter 6, we will examine various analyses which attempt to characterize, in general terms, the subset of *wh*-constituents which occur in situ, but will conclude that none of them account for the facts across the various Arabic varieties.

1.2.2.2 Restrictive relatives

The resumptive strategy is the default strategy for forming restrictive relative clauses in the various Arabic dialects. The investigation of those constructions in chapter 7 leads us to uncover further generalizations in the syntax of resumption. First, we show that a difference needs to be made between definite relatives and indefinite relatives. Definite relatives always occur with the complementizer *allaði*, the only complementizer available for relative clauses in Standard Arabic (13a); indefinite relatives on the other hand cannot occur with a complementizer (13b).

- (13) a. Daaʔa l-kitaabu *(allaði) štaraytu-hu l-baariḥata
 be-lost.3ms the-book that bought.1s-it yesterday
 ‘The book that I bought yesterday is lost.’
 b. ʔufattišu ʔana kitaabin (*allaði) ʔaDaʕtu-hu l-yawma
 look.1s for book that lost.1s-it the-day
 ‘I am looking for a book that I lost today.’

When the gap strategy is available in forming relative clauses (e.g. in Standard Arabic), it is only available for definite relatives and not for indefinite relatives. While non-referential NPs can be the antecedent in a definite relative, they cannot head an indefinite relative.

Second, a thorough investigation of the distribution of resumptive pronouns in definite relatives shows that, unlike what is generally argued for Arabic, resumption is selectively sensitive to islands. Thus, a resumptive pronoun related to a non-referential NP cannot occur inside an island, as illustrated in the Lebanese Arabic sentences in (14).

- (14) a. *s-sərʕa lli btinbəSTo laʔanno saami byištixil fiy-a
 the-speed that pleased.2p because Sami works.3ms with-it
 hiyye l-maTluube
 she the-required
 ‘The speed with which you are pleased because Sami works is the required one.’