RESEARCH

WORD ORDER AND THE MINIMALIST PROGRAM: DATA FROM JORDANIAN VARIETIES

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Summary: This study compares the canonical word order of two varieties of Arabic – Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Jordanian Non-Standard Arabic (NSA) – from a minimalist perspective. There are differences between the two varieties in terms of constituent movement motivations and sequence. Constituents are moved due to topicalization at the Logical Form and due to feature strength movement at the Surface Structure. Classical Arabic (CA) allows word order scrambling, therefore, it can be said that MSA and NSA are two forms of CA. However, the vocabulary of NSA has greatly deviated from that of CA. The use of VSO instead of SVO means less subject-verb agreement and, hence, less morphology. The article also briefly considers Arabizi.

Like other Arab countries, Jordan has two language varieties coexisting side by side: Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Non-Standard Arabic (NSA). While all Arabic-speaking countries share MSA, each has its own NSA characterized by differences in phonology, syntax, and lexical items. In this paper, the differences between NSA varieties are of no concern, the major focus will be on the syntactic differences between Jordanian NSA and MSA.

MSA is used in Jordan as the official language. It is used in the media and in most formal situations unless one or all the speakers cannot speak it. It is a language variety that is learned through formal education but, despite this education, many speakers fail to use it as a means of spoken interaction, even though they can use it for the purposes of writing, whether formal or informal. In fact, NSA had no written form in text messaging and web blogs such as *Facebook* until recently. Thus, language users had no other choice than using MSA for the purpose of writing both official documents, letters, and most informal written interactions.

On the other hand, NSA is used as the major spoken variety and in daily conversation among people. It has been noticed that it is unlikely to find a speaker who would use MSA in an oral situation other than lecturing in a school or in the Mosque during prayers. Furthermore, this language variety is changing

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rapidly through the usage of words from other Arabic varieties or even from English in a phenomenon called Arabizi which simply means using English words by inserting them directly instead of Arabic words using the syntax of Arabic [Malkawi 2012].

In this paper, I attempt to explain the extent to which Jordanian NSA is syntactically different from MSA in relation to word order and the influence, if any, of Arabizi on the grammatical structures of NSA.

Studies carried out in the past [Ferguson 1959; Suleiman 1985; Blair 2000] looked at MSA and NSA from phonological and sociolinguistic perspectives and were often concerned with diglossia and bilingualism. Here, I am looking at the syntactic differences between the two varieties, with focus on word order in particular, since MSA is VSO and NSA is SVO in the grammatical structure. I will consider briefly how the Minimalist program (MP) [Chomsky 1995] can account for the syntactic differences between the two varieties.

The following clauses exemplify the sets of structures that are found in MSA (VSO):

(1)   katab Ahmad qissah
        wrote Ahmad story
        'Ahmad wrote a story.'

(2)   nahaq   al-Hemar
        brayed the-donkey
        'The donkey brayed.'

(3)   yaqtareb al-jayesh besur≠ah
        approach the-army   with.fast.adv
        'The army is approaching fast.'

(4)   banat al-dawla   manazel le   al-foqra'
        built the-government   houses   for the-poor
        'The government built houses for the poor.'

(5)   al-jaw   barid
        the-weather   cold
        'The weather is cold.'

(6)   ma.zal Mohammad   na'em
        still   Mohammad   asleep
        'Mohammad is still asleep.'

(7)   thahab al-mudares ela al-ssaf
        went   the-teacher to   the-classroom
        'The teacher went to the classroom.'

(8)   thahab al-mudaresuun ela al-ssaf
        went   the-teachers   to   the-classroom
        'The teachers went to the classroom.'

By contrast, the following clauses exemplify the sets of structures that are found in NSA (SVO) to represent the same sentences:

(9)   Ahmad ’alaf   gesah
        Ahmad wrote   story
        ‘Ahmad wrote a story.’

(10)   el-Hmar.   naahag
        the-donkey.sing brayed.sing
        ‘The donkey brayed.’

(11)   el-jeish   ga?ed iygareb   bsur?ah
        the-army.sing is.sing approaching.sing quickly
        ‘The army is approaching fast.’

(12)   el-dawlah   banat   beout   la-l fogra
        the-government.sing built.sing houses   for-the poor
        ‘The government built houses for the poor.’

(13)   el-jaw   msge?
        the-weather cold
        ‘The weather is cold.’

(14)   Mohammad   ba?duh   naem
        Mohammad   still   asleep
        ‘Mohammad is still asleep.

(15)   el-istath   raH   ?ala al-ssaf
        the-teacher.sing went.sing to   the-classroom
        ‘The teacher went to the classroom.’

(16)   el-asat.theh   raH-u   ?ala al-ssaf
        the-teachers.Plural went.Plural to   the-classroom
        ‘The teachers went to the classroom.’

Chomsky and Lasnik [1993] proposed a syntactic account that captures word order differences in language on the basis of fundamental assumptions, including the validity of the Subject-in-VP Hypothesis [Sportiche 1988] and the Split-INFL Hypothesis [Pollock 1989]. It assumes that all languages are approximately the same in the D-Structure in terms of the relationships between the constituents (specifiers, heads, complements, and adjuncts) in comparable sentences and that the level of representation which is the input to the semantic component (Logical Form, LF) is the same for all languages. Word-order differences between languages, then, are the result of a parametric setting regarding which constituents are raised at S-Structure and which are allowed to remain in their D-Structure position until LF. It assumes that the constituents are raised into a higher position in the phrase marker tree to receive or check features of tense and agreement. After the necessary movements have taken place to account for the S-Structure order, other movements take place at LF so that all languages have the same LF as input to the semantic component for comparable

sentences. In a derivation, then, rules of Verb-Raising, Subject-Raising, and Object-Raising apply to yield the appropriate surface form, with languages differing in which rules apply at SS and which are left to apply at LF.

Following Chomsky and Lasnik's proposal, it may be proposed that at D-Structure all languages are alike as regards the relationship between verbs and their arguments. For a VSO language like MSA, Verb-Raising applies at S-Structure:
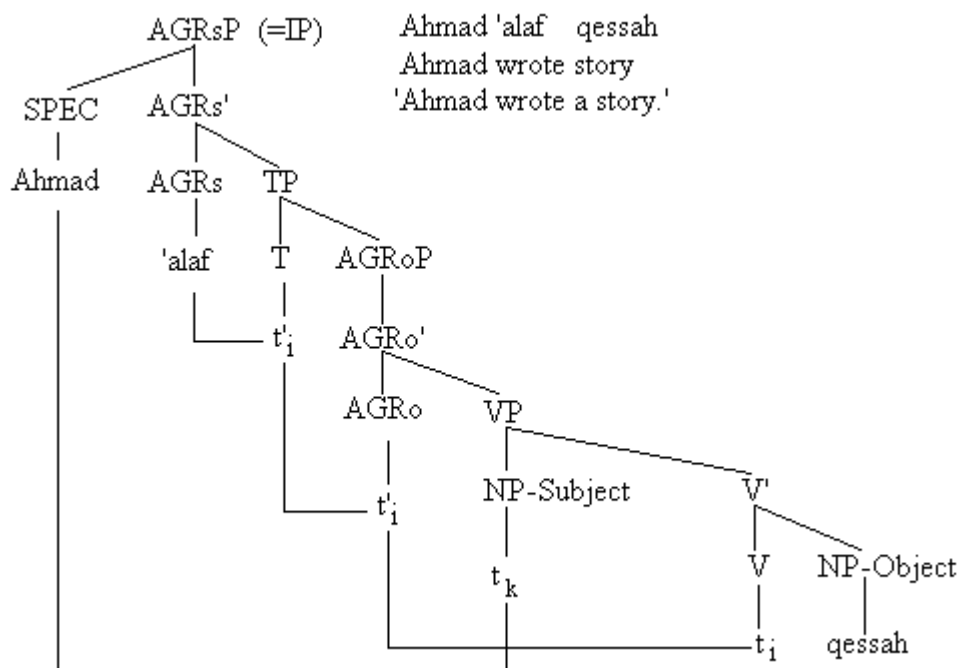
Figure 1. Verb-Raising in MSA
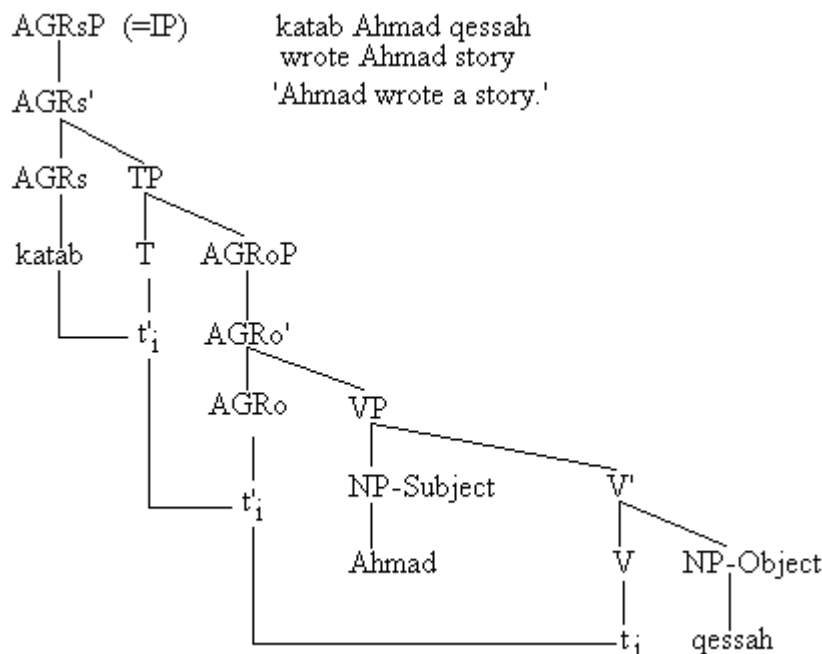
The phrase marker tree shows Verb-Raising that takes place at S-Structure; Subject- and Object-Raising is left to LF. The movement of the verb is motivated in that the verb moves to a higher position to receive or check its relevant syntactic features. Thus, it moves both to T (to check tense) and to AGRs (to check agreement). Some verbs do not agree with their NP subject in number and this can be interpreted as supportive of the hypothesis that tense and not agreement is the basic motivation for the Verb-Raising.

For the SVO order found in NSA, not only Verb-Raising applies at the S-Structure, but also Subject-Raising, namely by moving NP-subject from its DS position [Spec, VP] to its SS position [Spec, IP]. The NP-object is not moved until LF:

Figure 2. Subject-Raising in NSA


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        AGRsP (=IP)        Ahmad 'alaf   qessah
                           Ahmad wrote story
  SPEC    AGRs'            'Ahmad wrote a story.'
   |
  Ahmad   AGRs   TP
           |
          'alaf   T    AGRoP
                  |
                  t'ᵢ   AGRo'
                        
                       AGRo   VP
                        
                        t'ᵢ   NP-Subject        V'
                        
                                   tₖ        V    NP-Object
                                             |
                                             tᵢ    qessah
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The phrase marker tree shows that the verb raises just as it does in MSA.

As can be seen in examples (1)-(16) above, NSA manifests more subject-verb agreement than MSA does. Under the Minimalist Program, movement must be motivated. For raising patterns such as those outlined above, a common assumption is that the nodes which are landing sites and the lexical items which are raised both carry syntactic features. If the nodes carry so-called strong features, they cannot pass the PF interface conditions because they lack phonological substance. Thus, they must be obliterated before S-Structure by the raising of the lexical item carrying the same features (which because of manifesting phonological content do not violate the PF interface conditions). By contrast, if the features of the landing site nodes are characterized as weak, no movement before S-Structure is necessary (and will take place only at LF).

Under the hypothesis set forth above, both MSA and Jordanian NSA show Verb-Raising at S-Structure; within the Minimalist Program this is accounted for by proposing that Agr and T have strong V-features that must be obliterated before the S-Structure.

Jordanian NSA also manifests Subject-Raising, for which MP proposes strong N-features in T. This contrasts with the pattern in MSA, in which the subject is not raised, accounted for in MP by the hypothesis that T has weak N-features. The overt subject-verb agreement in NSA can be proposed as possible overt manifestation of strong N-features that thus forces NP-raising. The MP does not require such surface evidence, but since it is found, it can be seen as supportive.

Consideration of one additional bit of data is instructive regarding the direction of historical change. Classical Arabic (CA), the language of the Qur'an, is considered to be VSO in its neutral order. It is known that MSA is a resurrected variety based upon CA and thus post-dates it, and although nothing is known about the history of Jordanian NSA, at least as a modern variety it post-dates CA as well. In fact, there is no evidence supporting the hypothesis that historically Arabic is anything but VSO.

Nevertheless, although CA is VSO in its neutral order, all six possible orders are found when constituents are fronted for topicalization[2]. All of the following sentences express the proposition 'Ali wrote a letter', though with differing nuances of focus (here *katab* 'wrote', *Ali-yun* 'Ali' – Subject, *resalat-an* 'a letter' – Object):

VSO: kataba Ali-yun resalat-an
SVO: Ali-yun kataba resalat-an
SOV: Ali-yun resalat-an kataba
VOS: kataba resalat-an Ali-yun
OVS: resalat-an kataba Ali-yun
OSV: resalat-an Ali-yun kataba

Given the assumptions of the MP, it can be proposed that such fronting of NPs for topicalization results form the occurrence of strong [+ Focus] features in [SPEC, CP], which, because they are strong and lacking phonological content, must be obliterated at S-Structure in order to satisfy the PF interface conditions.

Of course, a child acquiring Arabic and hearing a sentence in which the subject NP occurs initially, is unable to differentiate on the basis of that fact alone whether that NP occurs in [SPEC, CP] or [SPEC, IP]. It seems likely, therefore, that this ambiguity could easily result in the misinterpretation of the occurrence of the NP in the initial position as being in [SPEC, IP] rather than [SPEC, CP], resulting in SVO order rather than VSO order with fronting of a topicalized NP-Subject. There is a fundamental transparency involved in this account given the well-known common pairing of subjecthood and topicality. If the child learning Arabic makes such an error, the change from VSO (CA) to SVO (Jordanian NSA) can be accounted for rather simply. The alternative analysis, namely that Arabic is historically SVO and has changed to VSO, is unsubstantiated in the literature relating to the history of Arabic. Such a change would require a change of strong N-features in T to weak N-features. While such an account is logically possible, it is not substantiated in this case.

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[2] Arabic cannot be said to allow ultimate free ordering of its constituents. It is true that one can move a constituent from one position to the other preserving the same meaning. But the impact of different orders on the hearer is not the same. The first thing to mention here is that verbs cannot come at the end of the sentence. This means that noun phrases are the ones which freely move in the sentence and it is by virtue of the inflection that one can tell who the subject is and who the object in the sentence is. Topicalization is the main reason for this kind of free movement.

Now, since NSA is developing in a faster and greater pace than MSA, let us have a look at some recent data taken from *Facebook* chats and decide if these interactions manifest any syntactic developments. The following are examples from Arabizi:

(17) kefak   ya   sweet.   Zaman ma shufnak. See you soon in sha'a Allah.
      how are you Hey sweetie a while not see you   if want Allah
      'Hey sweetie! How are you? It has been a while. Will see you soon hopefully.'

(18) marHaba ya   man.
      Hello   particle man
      'Hello man'

(19) raH yeblish elfilm   ba?d five minutes. Enjoy el?ardh.
      Will start   the movie after five minutes. Enjoy the show.
      'The movie will start in five minutes. Enjoy the show.'

The following examples are duplicates of (17), (18), and (19) respectively without Arabizi:

(20) kefak   ya   Helo.   Zaman ma shufnak. Benshufak in sha'a Allah.
      How are you particle sweetie a while not see you. See you if want Allah
      'Hey sweetie! How are you? It has been a while. Will see you soon hopefully.'

(21) marHaba ya   zalama.
      Hello   particle man
      'Hello man'

(22) raH yeblish elfilm   ba?d khams daqaiq. Istamte? bi   el?ardh.
      Will start   the movie after five minutes. Enjoy   preposition the show.
      'The movie will start in five minutes. Enjoy the show.'

Comparing examples (17), (18), and (19) with (20), (21), and (22) shows that the technique used in Arabizi is primarily based on inserting English words in place of Arabic words without changing the syntactic structure of the Arabic sentence. However, some non-ignorable changes take place. In example (22), a preposition is inserted when the Arabic word *el?ardh* is used. This preposition is omitted in (19). In this case, the word *el?ardh* would be the object of the preposition but without the preposition it would be the object of the imperative.

I conclude, with caution, that Arabizi involves only substitution of words and minimal or no syntactic changes at all. But due to the insufficient data available now, this phenomenon cannot be accurately described and should be left for further research till more data become available, since Arabizi is very young and was officially added to Google services only in 2012.

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