ASPECTS OF CLAUSE STRUCTURE IN ARABIC

A Study in Word Order Variation
in Literary Arabic

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Reproduced by the
Indiana University Linguistics Club
Lindley Hall 310
Bloomington, Indiana 47405
February, 1980
ABSTRACT

Arabic is one of the human languages that tolerate variation in the order of the words in its sentences. This study is an attempt to provide a descriptive account of this and related phenomena in literary Arabic. It is argued at the outset that the VSO order is the basic, and underlying order of constituents at the deep structure of the simple sentence in Arabic. The VOS surface order is accounted for by deriving it transformationally from the underlying VSO order through a movement process by which constituents of various syntactic categories move to a position immediately to the right of the verb.

This study involves a detailed discussion of the OVS order; another possible order at the surface. This is discussed within the general process of moving 'focused' constituents in simple sentences to the left of the verb. These sentences are distinguished from those of 'topic-comment' structure. The latter are analyzed as complex sentences with topic-NP's followed by sentential comments. The process of pre-verbal movement of focused constituents is discussed in detail and in relation to another process of pre-verbal movement: wh-movement. The two are argued to be separate processes in spite of apparent similarities. The formal properties of these two processes are discussed in detail together with the constraints that govern them. As movement processes, they both share the general features that movement processes are characterized with. One of these features is the successive nature of movement that Chomsky has proposed. It is argued here that movement is unbound. It follows that the ungrammaticality of structures that show movement does not stem from violation of this successive nature of movement; rather, it is because in those cases, the link between the 'moved' element and the original place it started at cannot be established. This is offered as an explanation of the general phenomenon of the inadmissibility of moving constituents form as syntactic islands.

Topic-comment structures are discussed in the final part of this study. The discussion involves providing a formal account for the structure of these sentences; the relation that must obtain between the topic-NP and a 'resumptive' pronoun in the comment-sentence; and the phenomenon of subject-pronoun deletion. Finally, suggestions are offered to account for 'equational' sentences in terms of the analysis provided for sentences of topic-comment structure. These suggestions were made in an attempt to provide a unitary analysis for sentences with a verbal 'core', i.e., those which constitute the subject-matter of this work, and 'equational' sentences which involve the juxtaposition of two constituents.

Besides providing a structural characterization of the noted variation in the word order of Arabic sentences, this study results in bridging the gap between those analyses that the Arab grammarians provided for the structure of the sentences in Arabic and analyses proposed in terms of contemporary linguistic theories.