

The left periphery in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA): A minimalist account

Abstract

This paper is trying to investigate the interaction between case checking and the thematic roles of the DP in al-Ishtighal (Verbal Occupation) construction in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Standard Arabic belongs to the group of VSO languages which also allow SVO as an alternative order in finite clauses. Yet, Arabic possesses a rich case morphology that is able to mark the thematic roles of the DPs in the clause. This research provides evidence that there are differences between left-dislocation and the Verbal Occupation construction (Ishtighal) despite of their structural similarity. These differences show that Verbal Occupation construction in MSA has the tendency to behave as Topicalization where the fronted DP possesses the Focus characteristics. Further, it has been shown that the multi-foci tendency is valid in such constructions like Verbal Occupation.

Key words: Verbal occupation; topicalization; focus; left periphery; topic

0-Introduction

Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) displays a topic-comment structure of the following type:

1- kareem-**un** ra?a-hu Zayd-un
Kareem-nom saw3ps-him-acc Zayd-nom
“Kareem, Zayd saw him”

This sentence represents a topic-comment structure: A topic DP (kareem-un) followed by a comment (a sentence) which contains a resumptive pronoun coreferential with the topic. Topics in Arabic have defining characteristics (Bakir: 1979; Suaih 1980; Abdul-Ghani: 1981; Farghal: 1986; and Fassi Fehri: 1993). For instance, Topics are Definite, Nominative and Base-generated. They also have an obligatory coreferential resumptive pronoun in the comment part.

Arabic also displays a topicalization structure of the following type:

2-Kareem-an ra?a Zayd-un.
kareem-acc saw -3ps zayd-nom
“Kareem , Zayd saw”

According to Mohammad (2000:63), topicalization (or focalization, Bakir 1980) contains an NP which is optionally moved from base-generated position that is not sentence –initial to another position, leaving a gap behind. This DP (the so-called NP) is the Focus (Foc) of the sentence. As shown in (2) above the fronted DP is the object which retains its accusative case that is assigned by the lower verb *ra?a* ‘saw’, and a gap is left behind at the site of extraction. Thus, the DP forms a chain with the gap position represented in the conformity of the case assignment retained for the moved DP. Mohammad (2000:65-67)

also proposes that the NP is a long-distance extractable and it obeys the movement constraints. Among other characteristics, Focus DP in Topicalization construction also obeys no definiteness or specificity restriction; i.e. unlike the Topic DP-which is always definite- the Foc DP can be either definite (3a) or indefinite (3b):

3a- al-walada ra?ayt-u

the-boy -def saw -I
“ The boy I saw.”

b-walada-an ra?ayt-u

a boy -indef. saw -I
“ The boy I saw.”

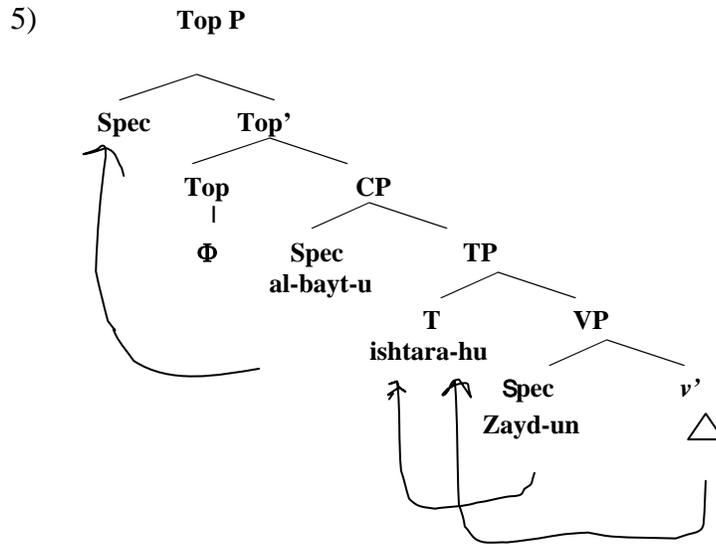
To summarize, Focus DP retains its case forming a chain with the gap, it is also not base-generated; i.e. it is extractable and finally it can be either definite or indefinite.

This paper is composed of the following main parts: part (1) gives an overview of the structure of left-dislocation. Part (2) presents the structure of the Verbal Occupation known in Arabic as al-Ishtighal. The third part –Data and Assumptions – gives a detailed presentation of the arguments supporting the notion that the Verbal Occupation construction consists of a Focus DP not a Topic DP. The idea of multi foci in MSA is presented in the subparts B&C.

1-Shorafat’s Analysis (1999):

Shorafat demonstrates that a Topic Phrase should be projected immediately above CP (Complementizer Phrase). A Topic can be inserted through Merge in [Spec, CP] provided that an independent Topic Phrase is projected immediately above CP.

4-al-bayt-u ishtara-hu Zayd-un
 the -house.Nom bought -it zayd-Nom
 "Zayd bought the house"



The Topic DP is generated in [Spec, CP] .The TopP is headed by a null particle Φ . This particle comprises the set of formal features and needs to be checked by the overt movement of the Topic. The Topic movement is vacuous since the landing site is adjacent and no phonetically realized material intervenes. Thus, schematically a Topic Phrase projection has the following representation:

6-[TopP [Spec [Top' [Top [CP [TP...]]]]]]

2- Johnson's Analysis (1998): Verbal Occupation "al- Ishtighal"

This construction is basically left-dislocation. In the Topic position there is a base-generated structure (Chomsky 1977 and Cinque 1991). According to Cinque (1991), left-dislocation cannot be an instantiation of wh-type movement of the sentence initial NP. This type of left-dislocation displays the

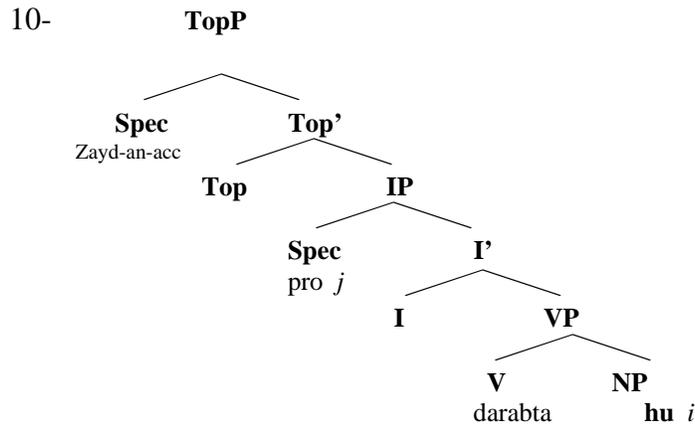
topic-comment construction with the topic assigned the accusative case with the resumptive pronoun either in the accusative or the genitive case:

7- a-l qiSa-ta qar?' a-**ha** aT-Talib-u
 the -story-acc read 3PS- it (accusative) the-student-nom
 "The story, the student read it"

8- aT-Talib-a marart-u bi-bayti-**hi**
 the -student -acc stopped- I 1PS by house-his- (genitive).
 "The student, I stopped by his house"

According to the GB model, a different Topic structure would be required, one in which a governing head would not be blocked by intervening barriers. Such a head becomes available if an additional maximal projection TopP (Topic Phrase) is assumed having a functional head Top and a specifier position such that the left-dislocated NP occupies the spec. Top. According to this proposal, the NP can be governed without any maximal projection barriers.

9- Zayd-an *i* darabta-**hu** *i*
 zayd-acc you *j* - struck -him
 "Zayd, you struck him"



3-Data and Assumptions:

It is obvious that the constructions topic-comment (left-dislocation) and Verbal Occupation (Ishtighal) motivate further investigation in terms of exploring the syntactic differences and properties that each construction displays. This research is expected to uncover the architecture of left periphery of the CP structure for the MSA.

A-Case selection:

The above –mentioned two analyses make clear that the functional head Top is supposed to be able to assign either the nominative case under checking for the topic-comment construction (Shorafat: 1999) or the accusative case under structural government for Verbal Occupation (left-dislocation) construction (Johnson: 1998). It is still unclear how to account for the notion that a governing head may assign two cases simultaneously in the same structure. Let's consider the following examples:

11-Salim-**un** qabaltu-hu . (Topic-comment with a nominative DP)
Salim-NOM met –I-him
'Salim, I met him'

12-Salim-**an** qabaltu-hu. (Verbal Occupation with an accusative DP)
Salim-ACC met –I-him
'Salim , I met him'

13- walad-an qabalt-u (hu) ams (Topicalization)
a boy-acc met -I (-him) yesterday
'A boy, I met yesterday'

This nominative –accusative case asymmetry of the fronted DP makes clear that the Verbal Occupation construction has the same case properties found in Topicalization in MSA where the Topicalized DP (Focus) bears the accusative case with the an optional resumptive pronoun as a result of the movement from its original position to the head position. This distinction is made clear in terms of the chain notion (Chomsky: 1986). Put it differently, the initial DP in (12) forms a chain with the clause –internal position occupied by the resumptive pronoun attached to the verb. This preposed Focus bears the accusative case by virtue of being related to the direct object position while in (11) the DP (**Salim-un**) bears the nominative case supporting the notion that it is base –generated and it does not form a chain with the accusative resumptive pronoun attached to the verb *qabala* ‘met-he’.

This significant difference between the DP in the Topic-comment construction (11) and the Verbal Occupation (12) suggests that the DP in the latter construction forms a chain with its clause internal position represented by the clitic. On the other hand, the left dislocated DP in the Topic- Comment construction in (11) does not form a chain with the with the clause internal pronoun, so it bears a Case different from the case associated with the clause internal position. This case variation of the left-peripheral DP attracts the attention to the fact that the preverbal DP in constructions like the Verbal Occupation in (12) could be classified as Foc not Top DP.

B-Topic position with Question Operators:

According to Rizzi (1997), in Italian, question operators follow

Topics.

14-a- *A chi, il premio Nobel, lo daranno?

“To whom, the Nobel Prize, will they give?”

b- Il premio Nobel, a chi lo daranno?

“The Nobel Prize, to whom will they give it?”

This order of the Topic with the question Operators is unlikely to be found without posing any problem for the topic-question operator in MSA. Based upon the data shown below, it seems obvious that Question Operators in MSA are compatible with both Focus and Topic but with a different order. While-similar to Italian - it is possible for the question operators in MSA to follow Topic in the left-dislocation: Topic-comment construction; it is not possible for such an operator to follow this Top DP in the Verbal Occupation construction rather it can precede it. I think this characteristic enhances the tendency for the DP in the Verbal Occupation construction to be similar to that DP (Focus) in Topicalization where Focus and the verb cannot be separated by any element.

15 a- Zayd-un **mata** qabalt-u-hu? (Topic-comment)
Zayd -NOM when met-you-him(acc)

b- *mata Zayd-un qabalt-u-hu?
When Zayd -NOM met-you-him(acc)

16a- *Zayd-an **mata** qabalt-u-hu? (Verbal Occupation)
Zayd -ACC when met-you- him (acc)

b- **mata** Zayd-an qabalt-u-hu?
When Zayd -ACC- met-you-him (acc)

17- **mata** rajul-an qabalt(u-hu)? (Topicalization)
when man-acc met -you

Sentence (15b) demonstrates that a topic cannot follow the wh-expression (**mata** ‘when’), suggesting that, according to Shlonsky (1996), the verb obligatorily moves to the Comp head of which the wh-expression is the Spec. In (16b), I assume that the DP (*Zayd-an*) is in Focus position. The evidence is that it can be an instance of contrastive focus (18a), used in contexts where the speaker gives information which is in conflict with existing information (Ouhalla: 1999):

18a- **mata** *Zayd-an* (*la ?baah-u*) qabalt-u-hu? (Verbal Occupation)
 When Zayd –ACC- (not his father) met-you-him (acc)

b- **Zayd-un* **mata** (*la ?abouh-hu*) qabalt-u-hu? (Topic-comment)
 Zayd –NOM when met-you-him (acc)

(18a) shows that the DP in the Verbal Occupation construction has the landing site the FocP in which it has the contrastive reading. (18b), on the other hand, shows that the nominative DP in the Topic position cannot have the contrastive reading displayed for the DP in (18a).

C-Topic-Focus Order in relation to Question Operators (Q Op):

In addition to Rizzi’s proposal displayed in part (B) on Italian, Shlonsky (2002) proposes that Focus is the legitimate place of wh-questions and interrogative particles in MSA. I.e, Focus and wh-operators are in complementary distribution where Focus takes place, a question operator does not. I assume that both focus and question operators in MSA are not in complementary distribution; hence they can occur simultaneously. The data below also motivate the question of having one Focus or two in the complementizer layer in MSA.

19a- *ar-rajul-u kayfa ibna-hu wajadt?* Topic-comment (Topic...Question
 Operator...Focus)
 the man –Nom (Topic) how son-acc- –his(focus) found –you

b- **ar-rajul-a kayfa ibna-hu wajadt?*
 the man –Acc how son-acc- –his found –you

In example (19a), the nominative DP *ar-rajul-u* ‘the man’ is in the TopP spec and it is base-generated with the resumptive pronoun cliticized to the DP *ibna* ‘son’; hence the ungrammaticality of (19b) with the nominative Top. In addition, this Top DP cannot be judged as grammatical with the contrastive reading in (19c):

19c- **ar-rajul-u (la alwaladu) kayfa ibna-hu wajadt?*
 the man –Nom(Topic) (not the boy) how son-acc- –his(focus) found –you

On the other hand, the accusative DP *ibna-hu* ‘his son’ in (19c) which is related to a gap in the internal position of the lower verb *wajadt* ‘found-you’ can bear the contrastive reading as in (19d):

19d- *ar-rajul-u kayfa ibna-hu (la Sadeeqa-hu) wajadt?*
 the man –Nom(Topic) how son-acc- –his(focus) found –you

The same postulation of the contrastive reading possibility can be extended to be valid for the DPs in the Verbal Occupation construction. In the ungrammatical sentence (20a), the DP *ar-rajul-a* ‘the man’ can not precede the question operator, but it follows it in a certain order with the Focus being in the last part as shown in the following linear configuration:

(Question Operator ...Topic...Focus)

20a - **ar-rajul-a kayfa ibna-hu wajadt?* (Verbal Occupation)
 the man –Acc how son-acc- –his found –you

b- *kayfa ar-rajul-a ibna-hu wajadt?*
 how the man –Acc son-acc- –his found –you

In (20b) the order of the Topic DP with the Question Operator and the Focus DP conforms to the configuration proposed above. I assume that the DP *ibna-hu* ‘his son’ in (20b) is in the focus position due to the fact that this DP can be reconstructed in the DP gap in the internal position of the verb *wajadt* ‘found-you’ and this DP undergoes movement to the FocP forming a chain with the gap in the internal position argument of the verb *wajadt* ‘found-you’ as in (20c):

20c-kayfa ar-rajul-**a** wajadt ibna-hu?
 how the man –Acc found -you son-acc- –his

Another reason could be introduced in favor of the notion that the DP *ibna-hu* ‘his son’ in (20b) is in the Focus position is the fact that this DP is grammatical with the contrastive reading (20d):

20d-kayfa ar-rajul-**a** ibna-hu (*la Ummahu*) wajadt?
 how the man –Acc son-acc- –his (not his mother) found –you

But we cannot judge sentence like (20c) as grammatical with the contrastive reading of the Topic DP *ar-rajul-u* ‘the man’:

20c-**kayfa* ar-rajul-**a** (*la Ummahu*) ibna-hu wajadt?
 how the man –Acc (not his mother) son-acc- –his found –you

The notion that I want to raise here is that the DP *ar-rajul-u* ‘the man’ in (20b) repeated here as (20d) is in the in the accusative case and at the same time it is in the Topic position –which is against the ideas presented in the body of this paper that Topics are always nominative.

20d-kayfa ar-rajul-**a** ibna-hu wajadt?
 how the man –Acc son-acc- –his found –you

My assumption is based upon the arguments introduced by Shlonsky (2002) and Shorafat (1999) on the Topic which follows the Comp *anna* ‘that’. They propose

that the accusative Topic which is originally nominative, functions as the complement of the Comp *anna*. This argument is also supported by the notion that the thematic relation that holds between *anna* and the TopP is the same as that does between a verb and its object. Similarly, I assume that the accusative Top DP *ar-rajul-a* ‘the man’ is originally in the nominative case but due to its position as a complement of the Question Operator *kayfa* ‘how’ it is assigned the accusative case and retains its position as Topic. This it is plausible to come up with the notion that the Verbal Occupation sentence can have a Top DP in certain contexts like the interrogative structures presented in (20d). In this part, evidence is proposed in favor of having multiple foci in MSA and this evidence is supported by the data from both topic-comment structure and Verbal Occupation structure.

D-Embedded Topics:

In MSA, Topic-comment structure can be embedded. (Abdul-Ghani: 1981; Shlonsky: 2002 and Shorafat: 1999)

21- zanna Salimu anna al-bayta ishtara-hu Zayd-un
 thought Salim-Nom that the-house-Acc TOP bought-it Zayd-Nom
 ‘Salim thought that the house, Zayd bought it’

(Shorafat: 1999)

The accusative Topic *al-bayta*, which is originally nominative, functions as the complement of the Comp *anna*. The relation that holds between *anna* and the TopP in (21) is the same as that between a verb and its object. Shorafat proposes that since the TopP, as a whole cannot check the accusative case of the *Comp*, the Spec of this phrase *anna* can do the job.

How could such an analysis investigate the embedded constructions in Verbal Occupation in which there is no embedded Comp *anna* and the sentence maintains its grammaticality?

22-?alimt-u **ar-rajul-a** qabala-hu Kareem-un. (Verbal Occupation)
 knew -I the -man -Acc met-him kareem
 'I knew that ,the man , Kareem met him'

I assume here that similar to Topicalization, Verbal Occupation should not necessarily be introduced by the complementizer *anna* and the DP is in the Focus position. This assumption is based upon two arguments. First, this DP bears the accusative case and it is not assigned such a case by its internal position of the preceding verb *?alima* similar which is similar to what we have seen with the case assignment that occurs between the Comp *anna* and its DP *albayta* 'the-house'. So it is possible to hypothesize that the DP *ar-rajul-a* 'the-man' forms a chain with the resumptive pronoun attached to the lower verb *qabala* 'met' and this DP undergoes movement to the head position leaving behind an optional resumptive pronoun.

Second, this Foc DP can sit comfortably with the contrastive reading as in (23) below:

23-?alimt-u **ar-rajul-a** (*la alwalada*) qabala-hu Kareem-un. (Verbal Occupation)
 Knew -I the -man -Acc (not the boy) met- -him Kareem-nom
 'I knew that, the man, not the boy Kareem'

It appears clear that the Verbal Occupation construction –when embedded – provides strong evidence that the initial DP has the Focus characteristics such as the chain formation and the contrastive reading.

E- Island Constraints:

According to Johnson (1998), Verbal Occupation is a left-dislocation construction in which the dislocated DP is base generated and thus it is not sensitive to Ross' Island Constraints (1967). The data below present arguments that the DP in the Verbal Occupation is sensitive to such constraints and this conclusion supports the assumption that the Verbal Occupation DP is Focus not Topic. This property makes this construction - with a non base-generated initial DP - more similar to topicalization than to left-dislocation. I shall employ Ross' constraints (1967) to examine the validity of my assumption. First, Verbal Occupation but not Topic-comment construction is sensitive to the Complex Noun Phrase Constraint (CNPC):

24-* Zayda-an ra?aytu ar-rajula allathi Daraba-hu (Verbal Occupation)
Zayd-acc saw-I the man that hit-him
"Zayd, I saw the man that you hit"

25- Zayda-un ra?aytu ar-rajula allathi Daraba-hu (Topic-comment)
zayd-nom saw-I the man that hit-him
"Zayd, I saw the man that you hit him"

Second, the Verbal Occupation construction is sensitive to Ross' Coordinate Structure while the Topic-comment construction is not:

26-*Zayda-an ra?a Kareem-un ?iyyah-u wa Khalid-an. (Verbal Occupation)
zayd-acc saw- Kareem-nom him and Khslid-acc
'Zayd, Kareem saw him and Khalid

27- Zayda-un ra?a Kareem-un ?iyyah-u wa Khalid-an (Topic-comment)
zayd-nom saw- Kareem-nom him and Khslid-acc
'Zayd, Kareem saw him and Khalid

Third, Verbal Occupation cannot occur across Ross' *wh*-island Constraint (29), while the Topic-comment constructions can (30):

29- *al-muddariss-a tasa:ʔlt-u man raʔa-hu. (Verbal Occupation)
 the -teacher -acc wondered-I who saw-him
 'The teacher, I wondered who saw him.'

30-al-muddariss-u tasa:ʔlt-u man raʔa-hu. (Topic-comment)
 the -teacher -nom wondered-I who saw-him
 'The teacher, I wondered who saw him.'

Eventually, according to Fassi Fehri (1982 in Mohammad: 2000), Arabic displays what is called Right Branch Condition which is equivalent to Ross' Left Branch Condition. Topic-comment construction obeys this constraint (31); on the other hand, Verbal Occupation construction does not (32):

31- Kareem-un raʔayt-u baytah-u. (Topic-comment)
 kareem-nom saw-I house-his
 'Kareem, I saw his house'

32- *Kareem-an raʔayt-u baytah-u. (Verbal Occupation)
 kareem-acc saw-I house-his
 'Kareem, I saw his house'

The data presented above provide evidence that Verbal Occupation is sensitive to Ross' Constraints and this aspect can be easily found with Topicalization. Based upon this similarity between Verbal Occupation and Topicalization, it is plausible to conclude that the initial DP in both constructions is Focus and the DP in the Topic-comment is Topic.

Conclusion

It is evident from the data displayed above that there are differences between left-dislocation and the Verbal Occupation construction (Ishtighal) despite of their structural similarity. These differences show that Verbal Occupation construction in MSA has the tendency to behave as Topicalization where the fronted DP possesses the Focus characteristics. Further, it has been shown that the multi-foci tendency is valid in such constructions like Verbal Occupation.

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