Verb Subject Agreement and Subject positions in Modern Standard Arabic
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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this work is to investigate the asymmetries in subject/verb agreement in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), in the unmarked order - VS(O) and in the marked one - SV(O) – in order to indentify the position of the subject, I will first show that S in the SVO order is a Focus, on the basis of some question answering tests I submitted to 3 native speakers:

Man hataafa? (Who made a call?) **Muhammad hataafa** (Muhammad made a call).

The answer usually has the SV order, whereas VS seems inappropriate.

To the following question:

Man 'akala halaalan (Who ate halaal?) **Muhammad 'akala halaalan** (M. ate halaal)

the answer is again SV and not VS.

On the contrary, to the following question:

(3) Maadha hadatha? (what happened?) **Dakhala Muhammad** (Muhammad come).

The canonical answer is VS.

Consider now the following sentences:

(4) Man hataafa Rashiidan, Muhammadun au Zaydun? (who called Rashid? Muhammad or Zayd?

There are two possibilities: the answer could be a OVS sentence or a SVO one. The former is given in (8), the latter in (9). It's notable that both the order OSV and SOV are excluded by native speakers.

(8) Rashiidan hataafa Muhammadun (Rashiiid called Muhammad)

(9) Muhammadun hataafa Rashiidan (Muhammad called Rashiid)

(10)*Rashiidan Muhammadun hataafa (Rashiid, Muhammad called)

(11)*Muhammadun Rashiidan hataafa (Muhammad, Rashiid, called).

From these data we can conclude that the pre-verbal subject is a focused phrase, occupying a Focus position, which according to Rizzi (1997) and Belletti (2008) is the highest in the CP layer. Moreover, according to Rizzi (1997). Only one Focus position is available in the left periphery. Hence, examples (10) and (11) are ungrammatical given that the two preposed elements should both be interpreted as Focus.

In the VS order, when the plural subject refers to human beings, the subject agrees in gender *but not* in number with the verb. In the SV order the plural subject agrees in gender *and* number.

When the plural subject refers to non human beings, or simply to things, the subject doe not agree with the verb. The verb shows up with feminine singular agreement, both in VS order and SV order.

2. A new proposal

2.1 Deriving the VS order

These facts have been variously discussed by several scholars (Ferri 1993, Aoun 1994, Parkinson 1995, Shlonsky 1997, Bahloul and Harbert 2002 among many others). The sentences in (11) and (12), did not receive enough attention so far:

(11) (waqa'a-t) (*waqa'-na) (* waqa'-uu) al-'awraaq-u
     (fell-3FS) (fell-3FP) (fell-3MP) the- leaves-NOM

(12) al-'awraaq-u (waqa'a-t) (*waqa'-na) (* waqa'-uu)
     the- leaves-NOM (fell-3FS) (fell-3FP) (fell-3MP)

Following Ouhalla (2005), I propose that the gender feature can be substituted by the feature [class], which represents the minimal form of subject-verb agreement:

(13) Minimal verb-subject agreement involves [class] (Ouhalla 2005)

In MSA there are three noun classes: [masculine], [feminine] and [-human]. The last one is spelled out as feminine. Presumably, this is due to the fact that morphology in Arabic lacks a third paradigm for this class of nouns.

In order to explain the VSO order the following generalization can be given: The verb moves from its base-generated position to class° and S to Spec/ClassP to check its agreement features with the

verb. As hypothesized in (13), V and S agree for [class] only in a spec/head configuration. When S is in Spec/classP, it receives nominative case, that is, ClassP is a position that assigns nominative. Then, V moves to T° to support tense. The only features checked in TP are the tense ones, no agreement feature is checked in TP. If this were the case, S would raise to Spec/TP and the VS order would be impossible. It's important to keep in mind that no number features are checked, and that V appears in its singular form because this is the only possibility it has.

The representation of (12) is the same, but something more has to be said about the morpheme –*t* appearing on the verb *waqa'a-t*. The [–human] nouns agree for class with the verb and the morpheme we see on it is syncretic with the feminine one. Since, as predictable, the [–human] nouns adopt the marked form, that is, feminine, we have syncretism.

2.2. Deriving the SV order

As shown, in the SV order, the subject has a special interpretation. In these sentences the subject moves from Spec/ClassP to its criterial position where it is interpreted, through Spec/FinP- According to Rizzi and Shlonsky (2006), the nominal value of FinP is what allows S to move to this A' position; in MSA, FinP can be either [+nominal], or [–nominal]. The realization [+nominal] includes the features [class] [number] and [person]. Following Rizzi and Shlonsky (2006), when the left periphery is active, a criterial position called SubjP is licensed by FinP. SubjP is the canonical subject position and it has to be satisfied. The nominal value of FinP satisfies SubjP.

In this derivation, S is attracted in the Focus position to fulfill its scope-discourse role. This movement is licensed by FinP [+nominal], so S moves to Spec/FinP on its way to Spec/FocP.

There are now two possibilities for explaining the presence of full AGR:

-V moves to Fin°, in a local Spec/head configuration with S, and thanks to the Φ-features in FinP, it agrees with S, in [class], [number] and [person].

-V moves to Subj°. As said above SubjP is a criterial position that has to be satisfied. the features presents in FinP satisfies it and have to be valued. For this reason the verb must agree with the Φ-features of FinP. At this point of the derivation S stays in Spec/FinP and agrees, given the Spec/head configuration, with the features in Fin° as well. To sum up, there is a sort of indirect agreement between S and V, through the Φ-features present in FinP, which both V and S have to agree with. S cannot stay in Spec/FinP because it must raise to its discourse-scope-interpretative position.

What about SV agreement when S belongs to [-human] class, as in (11) and (12)? Here word order seems not to play a role in agreement. V always agrees with S, realizing feminine singular. As I claimed above for the agreement in VS order, with non human subjects, the morphology of Arabic lacks of a specific paradigm, and the [class] agreement feature is spelled out as feminine.

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