

Word Order and Agreement Asymmetry

Abstract:

A notable head-initial language, albeit has a free pattern of word order, is Standard Arabic. In this language, the following word order patterns are actually possible: (VSO), (SVO), (OVS), (OSV), (VOS). However, this language employs two of these word orders most commonly, i.e. VSO and SVO. Using other word orders entails the occurrence of A-bar movement for focus/topic purposes.

In Standard Arabic, partial agreement (Person, Gender) holds between the verb and the subject in VSO order as in (1) below; whereas in SVO order, full agreement (Person, Number, Gender) holds between the subject and the verb (2):

(1) hadhar-a at-tullaab-u an-nadwat-a (VSO)

attended-3.s.m the-students-nom the-seminar-acc

‘the students attended the seminar’

(2) at-tullaab-u hadhar-uu an-nadwat-a (SVO)

the-students-nom attended-3.p.m the-seminar-acc

‘the students attended the seminar’

If the subject is pronominal, then it usually gets dropped in the course of computation, since Standard Arabic is a null-subject language:

(3) Hadhar-na an-nadwat-a

Attended-3.p.f the-seminar-acc

‘(they/f) attended the seminar’

However, if the pronominal subject surfaces, then it can occur only in a preverbal position with full agreement between the pronominal subject and the verb:

(4) *Hadhar-uu hum an-nadwat-a

Attended-3.p.m they-m the-seminar-acc

‘they/m attended the seminar’

(5) Hum hadhar-uu an-nadwat-a

They-m attended-3.p.m the-seminar-acc

‘they/m attended the seminar’

Thus, it is clear that there is a correlation between word order and verbal agreement in Standard Arabic, i.e. full agreement in SVO order and partial agreement in VSO order.

The question that needs to be answered at this juncture is: what is the unmarked word order in Standard Arabic (cf. Mohammad 1990, Fassi Fehri 1993, Ouhalla 1994), and consequently what type of movement(s) occur in deriving the marked one? If the unmarked word order in this language is SVO, then it means that there is an instance of head-movement in the process of deriving the VSO order; whereas if the unmarked word order is assumed to be VSO, then we need two movements here in order to derive the alternate order SVO: i) head-movement of the verb; and ii) A-movement of the subject (cf. Boskovic 2007).

In this paper, I provide an analysis for word-order alternation in Standard Arabic; revisit the phenomenon of subject-verb agreement asymmetry in this language from a minimalist perspective (Chomsky 2000, 2001); and account for the absence of verbal agreement asymmetry with pronominal subjects (cf. Rizzi 1986a).

References:

Boskovic, Z. 2007. On the Locality and Motivation of Move and Agree: An Even More Minimal Theory. *Linguistic Inquiry* 38(4): 589-644.

Chomsky, N. 2000. Minimalist inquiries: The framework. In *Step by Step: Essays on minimalist syntax in honor of Howard Lasnik*, R. Martin, Micheals and J. Uriagereka (eds), 89-156. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.

Chomsky, N. 2001. Derivation by phase. In *Ken Hale: A life in language*, M. Kenstowicz (ed), 1-52. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.

Fassi Fehri, A. 1993. *Issues in the Structure of Arabic Clauses and Words*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Kayne, R. 1994. *The Antisymmetry of Syntax*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Mahajan, A. 2009. *PP Positions and Word Order*. Ms., EFLU, Hyderabad.

Mohammad, M.A. 1990. The problem of subject-verb agreement in Arabic: Towards a solution. In *Perspectives in Arabic Linguistics I*, M. Eid (ed.), 95-125. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Ouhalla, J. 1994. Verb movement and word order in Arabic. In *Verb Movement*, D. Lightfoot, and N. Hornstein (eds.), 41-72. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pollock, Jean-Yves. 1989. Verb Movement, Universal Grammar, and the Structure of IP. *Linguistic Inquiry* 20: 365-424.

Rizzi, L. 1986a. Null Objects in Italian and the Theory of Pro. *Linguistic Inquiry* 17:501-557.