

On the morphosyntax of nominal modification: postnominal & internominal adjectives

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Keywords: nominal agreement/concord, split features, adjectival modification, noun phrase.

Puzzle: Adjectives in the Arabic DP display two different patterns of agreement:

i. Full agreement on postnominal adjectives:

(1) al-sayyaar-at-a al-jadiid-at-a
DEF-car-F.SG-ACC DEF-new-F.SG-ACC
'The new car'

ii. Split agreement on internominal adjectives [N1-A-N2], i.e. cases where an adjective modifying a following noun ([N2]) is preceded by another noun ([N1]). Here, the adjective agrees with [N1] in definiteness and case and with [N2] in number and gender (see Siloni 1995, Hazout 2001, Kremers 2003, Assiri 2011, Aldholmi et al. 2019):

(2) al-rajul-a al-jadiid-at-a sayyaar-at-u-hu
DEF-man.M.SG-ACC DEF-new-F.SG-ACC car-F.SG-NOM-his
'The man whose car is new'

Proposal:

(i) Agreeing adjectives in Arabic are born predicative in a subject-predicate structure, and
(ii) The postnominal/internominal position of the adjective as well as full/split agreement come about as a result of the relativisation of this predication structure.

Analysis: Predicative adjectives can only agree in number and gender with the subject, whether it's simple (3) or complex (4) (see Benmamoun 2008):

(3) inna al-sayyaar-at-a jadiid-at-u-n
COMP DEF-car-F.SG-ACC new-F.SG-NOM-INDF
'Certainly, the car is new'

(4) inna [sayyaar-at-a al-rajul-i] jadiid-at-u-n
COMP car-F.SG-ACC DEF-man.M.SG-GEN new-F.SG-NOM-INDF
'Certainly, the car of the man is new'

When (3&4) are relativized (deriving 5&6 respectively), a relative complementizer (RC) can optionally be inserted. The RC always inflects for definiteness (see Aoun & Li 2003, Ouhalla 2013) and always triggers resumption in the gap:

(5) al-sayyaar-at-a al-lati hiya jadiid-at-u-n
DEF-car-FSG-ACC DEF-that it.F.SG new-F.SG-NOM-INDF
'The car which is new'

(6) al-rajul-a al-lathi sayyaar-at-u-hu jadiid-at-u-n
DEF-man.M.SG-ACC DEF-that car-F.SG-NOM-his new-F.SG-NOM-INDF
'The man whose car is new'

If no complementizer is present in the relative structure, the adjective must follow the relativized noun and must agree with it in definiteness and case, deriving full/split agreement, respectively:

(7) al-sayyaar-at-a al-jadiid-at-a
DEF-car-F.SG-ACC DEF-new-F.SG-ACC

‘The new car’

(8) al-rajul-a al-jadiid-at-a sayyaar-at-u-hu
 DEF-man.M.SG-ACC DEF-new-F.SG-ACC car-F.SG-NOM-his
 ‘The man whose car is new’

Hence, I argue that relative C in Arabic bears a [DEF] feature that must be realized. To do that, either the RC is inserted in C or the adjective must raise into it (Cf. Cinque 1993, Kayne 1994, Alexiadou & Wilder 1998, den Dikken 2007). Accordingly, when the RC is present (5&6), it realizes [DEF] on C and the adjective remains in-situ and agrees with the subject in number and gender. Definiteness and case on the in-situ adjective receive default values at spell-out (Al-Balushi 2011, Winchester 2019). However, if no RC is present in the relative structure (7&8), the adjective is attracted to C to realize C’s [DEF] feature. Here, the adjective must agree with the relativized noun in definiteness and case, deriving full agreement in (7) and split agreement in (8).

Acknowledgement: This research is supported by the DFG-funded RTG (2636): Form-meaning mismatches.

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