Word Order in Modern Standard Arabic: A GB Approach

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Abstract. This paper addresses basically Word Order in Modern Standard Arabic, henceforth MSA, in the GB framework. However it touches on some more recent ideas advocated in Chomsky (1995), [1]Uriagereka (1998)[2], Mohammad (2000)[3] among others, which fall in the minimalist approach. It is divided into two main parts. The first reviews the main ideas in some previous studies while the second tries to establish one basic word order in the GB approach.

1. Introduction

The definition of MSA, in our views, coincides with that of Cown's in which it stands for:" the form of language which, through the Arab world from Iraq to Morocco, is found in the prose of books, newspapers, periodicals, and letters. This form is also employed in formal public address, over radio and television, and in religious ceremonial"[4].

MSA, as classical Arabic, enjoys a great deal of freedom in word order because of its rich inflectional morphology. For example, if we take the following simple sentence:

(1) Qara?-a   al-tulaab-u   al-kutub-a
     read-past   the students-nom   the books-acc
     The students read the books.

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[1] Chomsky, Noam, *The Minimalist Program*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995),334-336.

[2] Uriagereka, Juan, *Rhyme and Reason*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998), 174-241.

[3] Mohammad, A. Mohammad, *Word Order, Agreement and Pronomalization in Standard and Palestinian Arabic*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V., 2000), 1-108.

[4] Cown, J., Milton, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, (New York: Spoken Languages Services Inc., 1976), vii.

we see that (1) has a VSO word order. However, (1) allows, through permutations of its constituents, the following sentences to be formed:

(2) Qara?-a   al-kutub-a   al-tulaab-u
    read-past   the books-acc   the students-nom
     The students read the books.
We notice that (2) has a VOS word order.

(3) al-kutub-a-acc   qara?-a   al-tulaab-u
    the books-acc   read-past   the students-nom
     The books, the students read .

 In (3) we have an OVS order:

(4) al-tulaab-u   qara?-uu   al-kutub-a
    the-students-nom   read-past-clitic=they-nom   the books-acc
     The students read the books
In (4) we have a (SV+clitic O) word order.

(5) al-kutub-u   qara?a-ha   al-tulaab-u
    the books-nom   read-past-clitic=them   the students-nom
     The students read the books
The last sentence has an (OV+clitic S) word order.

     What is noticeable is that in (2,3), there is a kind of permutation in the constituents only. However, in (4,5) there is, in addition to the permutations carried in (2,3), a clitic like pronoun on the inflectional ending of the verb which indicates the θ-role of the initial NP. These observations should be taken into consideration in any detailed analysis of word order in MSA.

2. Basic Word Order in MSA

Mohammad, summarizes the suggestions relating to word order in the literature as follows:

" Four word orders have been suggested as the basic word orders for Arabic: Arabic is a flat VSO language (cf. Fassi Fehri 1982; Ayoub 1981-1982; Saad 1975 and Bakir 1980); Arabic is a VOS language (cf. Anshen & Schreiber 1968 and Majdi 1990. Arabic is V-initial with the subject and the object being unordered with respect to each other (cf. El-Yassin 1985); and finally, Arabic is an SVO language (cf. Emonds 1980 and Borer& Tuller 1985). Thus the four positions can be reduced into two: SVO and VOS imply that there is a VP in Arabic, and VS and VNP* imply there is not."[5]

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[5]   Mohammad, A. Mohammad, *Word Order, ...* 51-52.

   And more recently we find: "We assume, along the lines proposed by Zagona (1981), Koopman and Sportiche (1991), Kurda (1988), Kitagawa (1986), and Speas (1986), that the thematic subject is generated VP-internally, Mohammad (1989), Fassi Fehri (1989), also make the assumption in (6a-b):

(6)   a. VSO order is derived by verb movement to I.
         b. SVO is further derived by subject raising to Spec IP."[6]

 In the following we will analyze each suggestion mentioned above and then conclude by adopting one word order as basic.

   What we mean by basic word order is the one which is present at D-structure which represents the GF-θ in the sense of Chomsky's *Lectures on Government and Binding,* henceforth[7]. This is the concept of basic word order in the generative grammar. At present, the same idea is captured by the projection principle and $\bar{X}$ theory: " Lexical information is syntactically represented"[8], or: "Let us replace the EST assumptions of LGB and related work by an approach along the following lines: The computational system selects an item X from the lexicon and projects it to an X-bar structure of one of the forms in (18), where $X=X°=[x\ X\ ]$.

                    (18) a. X
                         b. [$\bar{x}$ X]
                         c. [xp [$\bar{x}$ X]]
This will be the sole residue of the Projection Principle ."[9]

   However, before discussing the proposals above it is necessary to outline some basic structural and theoretical concepts that are vital to our discussion.

(6) a. A c-commands B if the first branching node dominating A also dominates B.
    b. A m-commands B if the first maximal projection dominating A also dominates B.
    c. A governs B if A is a head and both A and B are dominated by the same maximal projection.
    d. Case assignment takes place at S-structure only:"We assume that case assignment takes place at S-structure only." [10]
    e. Adjacency is a condition for case assignment and case checking at the syntactic level: "The adjacency requirement predicts that case assigners must not be separated from the NPs which they case mark   by intervening material…"[11]
    f. INFL is not a syntactic node but is attached to V in the lexicon, "Another

[6]   Aoun , Josef *et al* " Agreement, Word Order, and Conjunction in Some Varieties of Arabic." *Linguistic Inquiry*, 25, No. 2, Spring (1994), 195-220.
[7]   Chomsky, Noam, *Lectures on Government and Binding*, (Dodrecht: Foris, 1981), 43.
[8]   Haegeman, Liliane, *Introduction to Government & Binding Theory*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 63.
[9]   Chomsky, Noam, *The Minimalist Program*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), 189.
[10] Chomsky, Noam, *Lectures on Government and Binding*, (Dodrecht: Foris, 1981), 94.
[11] Haegeman, Liliane, *Introduction to Government & Binding Theory*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 167.

possibility is to assume that INFL is not a syntactic node but it is attached to V in the lexicon, following an axiom of lexical phonology that all affixation is done in the lexicon (cf. Kiparsky, Liebero,1980; Psetsky,1979."[12]

    g. The INFL features of the verb percolate to VP to check the subject of IP, for more details about the percolation process, see Radford.[13]

2.1   MSA is a VSO language

This is the position advocated by Arab traditional literature: "The usual word-order is for the subject to follow the verb followed by the object."[14]

    For the sake of argument, let us assume that this statement is correct. Then the basic rule in MSA would be:

(7)   S ⟶   V   DP   DP

(7)   will give MSA a flat basic syntactic structure, and (1) will have the following structure :

(8)
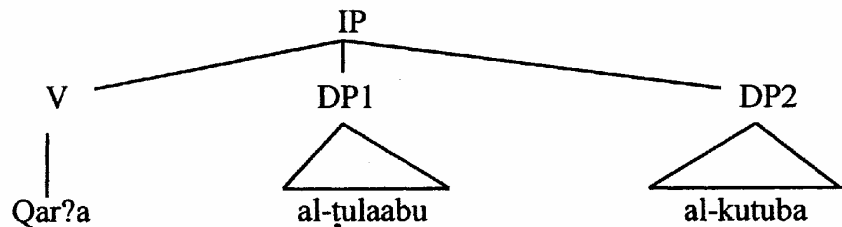
    First, notice that the condition on branching to be binary only is violated, and second the verb in (8) will assign and check both NPs that follow accusative cases since it is a transitive verb. There is nothing in the formal theories of checking and case assignment to prevent this structurally. However, although we want DP2 to be accusative because it is the direct object of the verb, we need DP1 to be nominative because it is the actual subject of the sentence. There is no way of preventing that without resorting to ad-hoc rules. More than that we have other orders as in (2-5). If we adopt (8) to represent the basic word order in MSA, then presumably (2,3) will have (9,10) respectively as their S- structure:

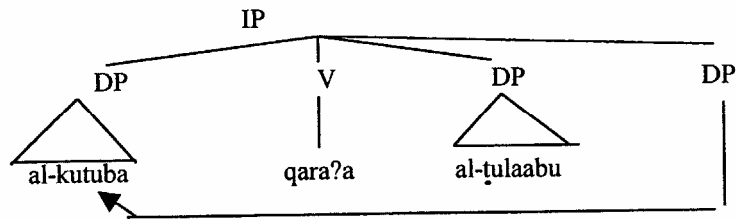[12] Bouchard, Denis, *On the Content of Empty Categories*, (Dodrecht: Foris, 1984), 143.

[13] Radford, Andrew, *Syntax: A minimalist Introduction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 90-91.

[14] Mohammad, A., M, "Topics in Arabic Syntax*,"* (*Ph.D Thesis, Essex University,* 1983), 6.

(9)
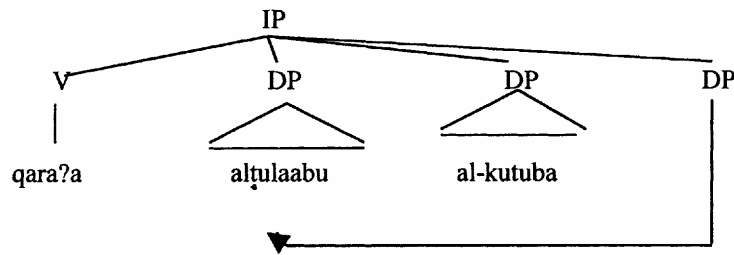
(10)

I believe it is not feasible to work out how the verb will check its object since it is followed by a nominative DP in its complement and an accusative DP in its specifier which means its complement and specifier features are reversed, assuming the DP that follow the verb to be its complement.

We face another and more severe problem in (4,5) because in addition to the permutations required to derive them from the supposed basic word order, VSO, we have clitics on the inflectional ending of the verb. If we accept VSO to be our basic word order, then (4,5) may be assigned (11,12) as their S-structures respectively:

(11)

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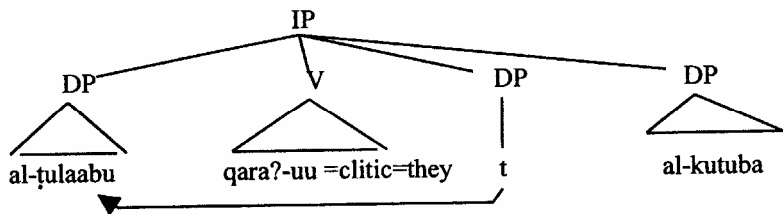
(12)
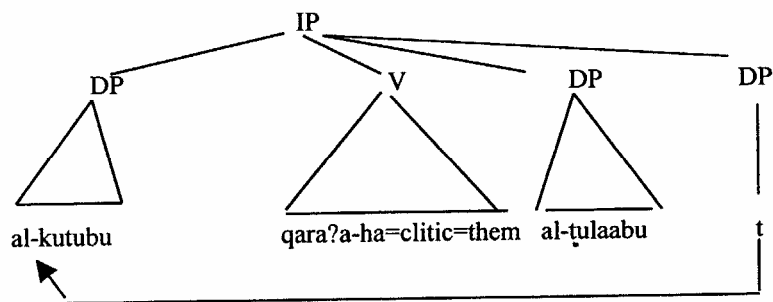
    We have to account for the clitics appearance in (10,11). Why did not they appear
in (9,10)? Aoun, J., argues: " I assume that clitics are the spelling out of case feature."[15]
In the literature about clitics there are two different points of view summarized in Jaeggli
as follows:

> "…two different approaches to the study of clitic pronouns have been developed, each
> one successful in its own way. One approach, characterized by Kayne (1975) and
> further developed in Quicoli (1976) and other studies, assumes that clitic pronouns are
> derived via a movement transformation. The other approach, developed (among other
> places) in Rivas (1977) and Ṣtrozer (1976), denies the existence of a clitic placement
> rule, and assumes instead that clitic pronouns are generated by phrase structure rules in
> their clitic position. I will first consider the movement theory. In this theory, pronouns
> are generated in NP position, and cliticized to the verb by an obligatory movement rule
> (Kayne's Clitic Placement, or perhaps a much more general rule), 'Move clitic' a
> possible instantiation of 'Move alpha', suggested by Quicoli (1976) and Rouvert and
> Vergnaud (1978)."[16]

    We adopt the view that clitics are the spell out of case feature as Aoun suggests,
and the result of a syntactic movement in the spirit of Kayne (1975) as we see in the
forthcoming sections.

     If we adopt VSO to be the basic word order we are faced with many difficulties
such as the ones shown above without any kind of reasonable solutions. However, let us
move to the second suggestion i.e. MSA is an SVO language.

2.2 MSA is a SVO language

    This word order is basically suggested for Arabic by Western scholars:"… it is

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[15]   Aoun, Josef, "Move α and Subjacency", *Linguistic Inquiry*, 12,(1981), 637-645.
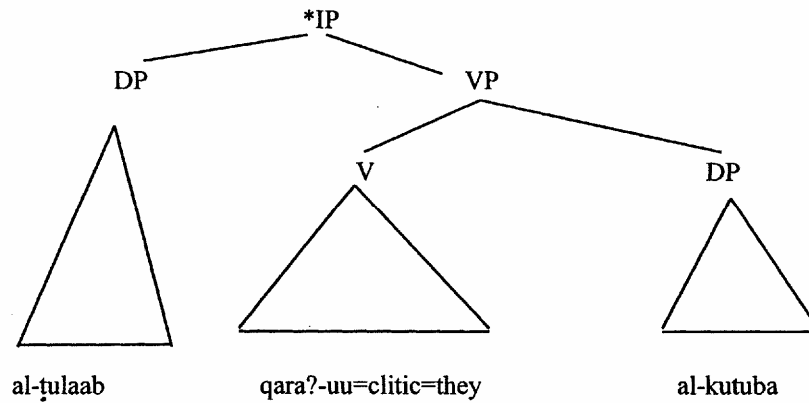[16]   Jaeggli, O. *On Some Phonologically Null Elements in Syntax*, (Dodrecht: Foris, 1982), 15.

proposed in James Snow (1965), Nancy Killean (1966), Nancy Lewkwicz (1967,1972) and more recently by Emonds (1980). With the exception of James Snow, none of these authors present one single syntactic argument as to why Arabic should be an SVO language."[17]

According to the above quotation, the basic rule in MSA may be as follows:

(13)   S ⟶   DP   VP

The rule in (13) may give a deceptive solution to (4,5) because they may be assigned (14,15) as their S-structure respectively:

(14)

*IP

DP

VP

V

DP

al-ṭulaab   qara?-uu=clitic=they   al-kutuba

(15)

*IP

DP

VP

V

DP

al-kutubu   qara?-ha=clitic=them   al-ṭulaabu
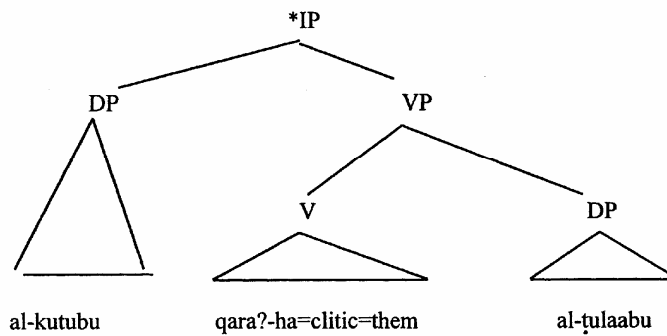
(14,15) suffer from many problems: first they do not account for the clitic appearance

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[17] Mohammad, A. Mohammad, "Topics in Arabic Syntax …", 44.

i.e. if we change the order to VOS or VSO the clitics will disappear as in (1,2). Second, if the clitics are the outcome of movement, see Homeidi[18] and the spell out of case feature as Aouns (1981) suggests, then (14,15) cannot be taken to be base sentences. There should be one movement that has occurred in these sentences and left the clitics. Third, The DP *al-kutubu* in (15) cannot be checked as subject of the verb *qara?a* because although its case is nominative, its theta role is patient not agent as required by the head features of the verb *qara?a*. Now, to the next suggestion.

2.3 MSA is a Free Word Order

This is the easiest to suggest for MSA but the most difficult to be maintained. Mohammad concludes quite clearly: " In this chapter I hope that I have shown it is indeed very difficult to assume Arabic as having one particular order as basic with the other orders transformationally derived."[19] This statement cannot answer many queries. If Arabic is a free word order, then any permutation of the constituents should be possible. Let us have some examples:

(16) katab-a   al-muºalim-uuna   al-kitab-a
       wrote   the teachers-nom   the book-acc
     The teachers wrote the book.

Let us carry some movements on (16) which has a VSO surface order. First, let us move the subject into preverbal position as:

(17) *al-muºalim-uuna   katab-a   al-kitab-a
       the teachers-nom   wrote   the book-acc

We find that (17) is ungrammatical because the subject is plural while the verb is singular. This is not allowed in Arabic in non VP-DP order. Arabic has another version of (16) as follows:

(18) *al-kitabu   katab-a   al-muºalim-uuna
       the book-nom   wrote   the teachers-nom

Also (18) is ungrammatical in MSA because the verb is not inflected in non VP-DP word order. Another point is that if MSA is a free word order, then why do we have clitics on the inflectional ending of the verb as in (4,5) while they disappear in other orders. Why should the clitics on the ending of the verb have the same theta role of the prepositioned DP. It seems to us that this suggestion cannot hold for MSA without going any further.

[18] Homeidi, M., "Government and Binding and Case Assignment in MSA", *Papers and Studies In Contrastive Linguistics*, 29 (1994), 123-141.
[19] Mohammad, A., M., "Topics in Arabic Syntax …", 79.

3. GB and MSA Word Order

I will assume that MSA is a configurational language with a basic VOS word order in line with Majdi (1990) [20]and Homeidi (1994).[21] According to this assumption, the tree representation of the basic word order would be as follows (irrelevant details omitted):

(19)
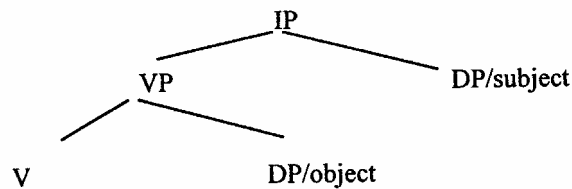
In (19) the features of the verb will be satisfied as having an accusative DP patient object complement and the whole VP, after percolation of the INFL elements from the verb to the VP, will check a nominative DP agent in the specifier position. Another possibility for the DP nominative subject is to assume that NOMINATIVE is the unmarked case in MSA , Homeidi,[22], and: "Mohammad (1988) and Ouhalla (1994) independently concluded that the nominative case is assigned under default." [23] All other available word orders on the surface structure will be obtained through two types of movements.

Although Mohammad A., (2000) does not adopt this suggestion, i.e. VOS, frankly, he alludes to this possibility indirectly so many times in his study. He states that this option is one of the few accepted word orders e.g. "The examples in (15) show that only VSO, VOS and SVO are perfectly acceptable. In cases where the subject and the object happen to have identical features, the sentence will be ambiguous between VOS and VSO reading"[24] and "according to the examples in (21), PA/Palestinian Arabic allows only VSO and VOS when the subject is non-specific, indefinite NP.[25] In the same page he states in a footnote: "In MSA there seems to be a preference for VOS when the subject is indefinite" (ibid). At one point he reaches a conclusion where VOS is the only acceptable word order:" Two comments about (i): (a) VOS seems to be the only word order permitted…" [26], and finally: "This will allow only the two word orders attested, namely VSO and VOS, and bars the remaining four."[27]

[20] Majdi, B., "Word Order and Proper Government in Classical Arabic", in *Perspectives on   Arabic Linguistics I ed*. Mushira Eid, (Amesterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamin, 1990),127- 154.
[21] Homeidi, M., "Government and Binding and Case Assignment in MSA", …, 123-141.
[22] Ibid., 138.
[23] Mohammad, A. Mohammad*, Word Order, Agreement and Pronomalization in ...,* 86.
[24] Ibid., P. 7-8.
[25] Ibid., p. 10.
[26] Ibid., p. 151.
[27] Ibid., p. 86.

To conclude this section I will assume that MSA is a configurational language with a VOS basic order. VSO is simply ruled out on the premise that the verb will wrongly mark its subject with an accusative case and θ- role as patient because it lies in the scope of the complement of the verb.

4. MSA is a VOS Language

Let us test our hypothesis against concrete data from MSA:

(20) (a)   darab-a   al-kurat-a   al-rajul-u
            kick-past   the ball-acc   the man-nom
            The man kicked the ball.

    (b)   darab-a   al-kurat-a   al-rijaal-u
            kicked   the ball-acc   the men-nom
            The men kicked the ball.

    (c)   darab-a   al-kurat-a   al-rajul-aani
            kicked   the ball-acc   the two men-nom
            The two men kicked the ball.

    (d)   darab-a-t   al-kurat-a   al-bint-u
            kicked-fem   the ball-acc   the girl-nom
            The girl kicked the ball.

    (e)   darab-a-t   al-kurat-a   al-bint-kicked-fem   the ball-acc   the girl-two-nom
            The two girls kicked tha ball.

    (f)   darab-a-t   al-kurat-a   al-banaat-u
            kicked-fem   the ball-acc   the girls-nom
   The girls hit the ball.

In (20a-f), the verb does not inflect for person or number but it does for gender in VOS order. The mark of a feminine subject is indicated by the "t" morpheme on the ending of the verb. Let us test the credibility of this conclusion by reversing the order between the subject and the object in post-verbal position:

(21) (a)   darab-a   al- rajul-u   al-kurat-a
            kicked   the man-nom   the ball-acc
            The man kicked the ball.

    (b)   darab-a   al-rajul-aani   al-kurat-a
            kicked   the two men-nom   the ball-acc
            The two men kicked the ball.

    (c)   darab-a   al-rijaal-u   al-kurat-a
            kicked   the men-nom   the ball-acc
            The men kicked the ball.

(d)   darab-a-t   al-banaat-u   al-kurat-a
        kicked-fem   the girls-nom   the ball-acc
        The girls hit the ball.

(e)   darab-a-t   al- bint-aani   al-kurat-a
        kicked-fem   the two girls-nom   the ball-acc
        The two girls hit the ball.

(f)   darab-a-t   al-bint-u   al-kurat-a
        kicked-fem   the girl-nom   the ball-acc
        The girl hit the ball.

All the sentences in (21a-f) show the same result i.e. the verb does not inflect for person or number but it does for gender in VSO surface order. The point now is how to choose between VOS or VSO since we have the same result in both orders. In other words, how can we justify the free movement between the subject and the object in post-verbal position. Remember, we have not yet included the clitic's appearance in our account. We will assume that the basic tree structure of both (20a-f) which have a surface VOS word order and (21a-f) which have a surface VSO word order to be as follows: (irrelevant details are omitted):

(22)
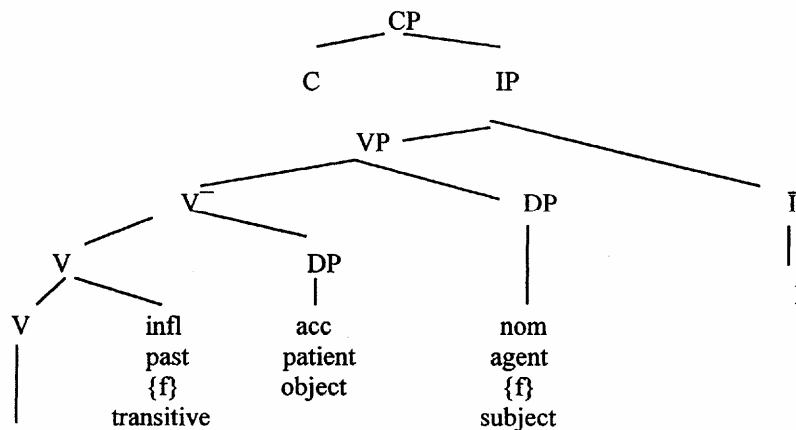
We can interpret (22), which adopts the VP shell hypothesis, as follows: the V̄ will check an accusative DP as its complement and it will assign it with a θ- role as patient since it is its internal argument. However, the V̄ node will check the specifier node for nominative case and θ- role as agent after percolation of INFL features to VP. All conditions are met for case theory, theta theory and checking theory. (22) represents the basic word order in MSA which is VOS. To have VSO, we need a movement, or an

inversion if you wish, between the DP subject and the DP object in post-verbal position. This can occur at LF where case features are checked or even at PF. The evidence is that although we have an inversion between the subject and the object nevertheless the cases of the DPs are still the same as those assigned at the syntactic level i.e. the DP that is adjacent to the verb at surface structure is still nominative, at the same time the DP which is not adjacent to the verb is still accusative whereas it should be nominative had this inversion happened at the syntactic level. It seems plausible to assume that MSA is, in fact, a VOS language and it has a free inversion between the subject and the object at PF or LF. Let us now try to account for the appearance of the clitics which normally appear when the sentence starts with a DP in the nominative.

5. Moving Subject DP or Object DP into C in the Syntactic Component

We assumed that MSA is a VOS language in which the verb does not inflect for person or number but it does inflect for gender as language specific property. Also we accounted for the appearance of VSO by assuming a free inversion between the subject and the object in post verbal position at PF or LF. We will assume that the verb should inflect for person's number and gender as well if we propose the object or the subject to pre-verbal position in the syntax, e. g:

(23)   (a)   al-rajul-aani   darab-aa   al-kurat-a
              the two men-nom   hit-clitic=two-nom   the ball-acc
              The two men hit the ball.

       (b)   al-rijal-uu   darab-uu   al-kurat-a
              the men-nom   hit-clitic=they-nom   the ball-acc
              The men hit the ball.

       (c) al-fatat-aani   daraba-taa   al-kurat-a
              the two girls-nom   hit-clitic=two-nom   the ball-acc
              The two girls hit the ball.

       (d)   al-fatyaat-u   darab-na   al-kurat-a
              the girls-nom   hit-clitic=they-nom the ball
              The girls hit the ball.

In (23a-d), the subject has been preposed into pre-verbal position with the result that we have a clitic like pronoun on the inflectional ending of the verb which encodes case features, theta role, person, number and gender of the preposed DP. We will assume that the sentences in (23a-d) have (22) as their D-structure and (24) as their S-structure:

(24)

CP
C⁻   IP
C   DP
e   + nominative i
VP   Ī
V⁻   DP
clitic
+ person
+ number
+ gender
+ θ-role
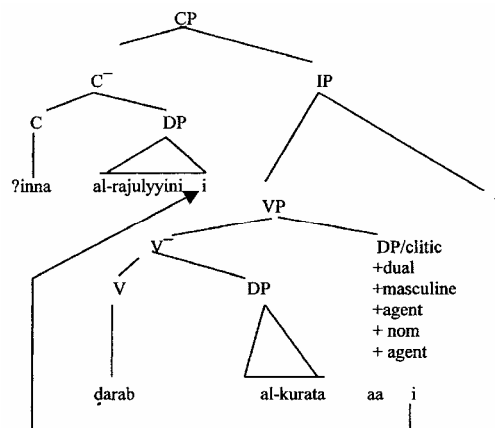V   NP   i
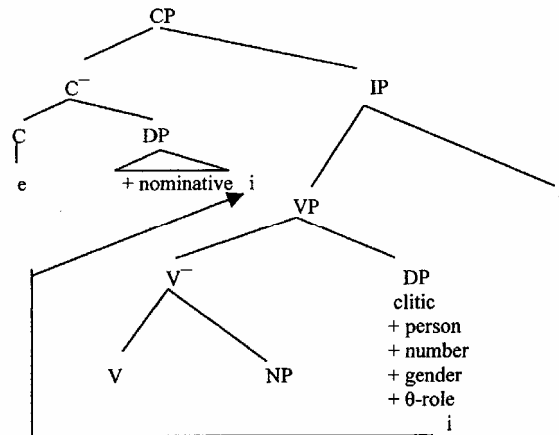
In (24), the DP in C⁻ will appear in the default nominative case as required since the C node is empty. However, it will receive its theta role through co-indexation with the clitic it triggered behind in its original position. Two points deserve mentioning: first, the DP in C⁻ node can appear in the accusative if the C node is filled by an acussative case assigner as in (25) which represents (23a) but with an accusative case assigner in C:

(25) ?inna   al-rajul-yyini   darab-aa   al-kurata
     that   the two men-acc   hit-past-two -nom   the ball-acc
     The two men hit the ball.

The tree structure of (25) is as follows:

(26)

CP
C⁻   IP
C   DP
?inna   al-rajulyyini   i
VP   I
V⁻   DP/clitic
+dual
+masculine
+agent
+ nom
+ agent
V   DP
darab   al-kurata   aa   i

Second, it is this order, i.e., the order which starts with a DP in the nominative, that allows the deletion of the subject in which case MSA becomes a pro drop language; if the C⁻ node is deleted in (26) we have the following pro drop sentence:

(27)   darab-aa   al-kurat-a
          hit-past- two-nom   the ball-acc
          The two hit the ball.

In fact MSA allows the preposing of the object instead of the subject into CP exactly as in (24). (28) is exactly identical with (23a) but with the object being preposed into CP instead of the subject:

(28) al-kurat-u   daraba-haa   al-rajul-aani
        the ball-nom   hit-past-clitic=it acc   the two men-nom
        The two men hit the ball.

It seems that the preposed DP into CP retains its θ- role through co-indexation with the clitic it triggers in its original position, so if it is deleted as an option which Arabic allows as in (28), then its person, gender, and θ-role features, which are necessary for interpretation at LF, are recoverable from the clitic. However, it receives a new case according to the new position in which it resides. This is very important, because if it carries its original case with it, then it will surface with two cases in contradiction with the case filter.

Before we sum up, a final point which deserves mentioning is the following: in some sentences, MSA allows the preposing of the object into pre-verbal position without changing its case i.e. it retains its accusative case as in:

(29)   al-kitab-a   qara?a   al-taalib-u
          the book-acc   read-past   the student-nom
          The book, the student read.

Is not (29) in direct contradiction with our conclusion that the pre-posed DP should appear in the default nominative case if it is not c-commanded by a case assigner element? The answer is no, because in (29) we have a topicalized sentence exactly like the English sentence:

(30)   Harry, I met.

6. Conclusion

It is hoped that the basic word order in MSA is decided in the GB approach without resorting to any ad hoc or unnecessary rules and it is VOS. The movements which are stipulated to account for the different word orders at surface level seems to me quite

straightforward. The condition for the branching to be binary is observed. The basic rule for generating MSA, as well as classical Arabic would be:

(31) CP ⟶   [C‾[C [DP]] [IP [VP [V‾ [V [DP]]]]   [DP]]]]]]]].

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(/ /   / /   )

ملخص البحث . يعالج هذا البحث مسألة الرتبة/ النسق اللفظي في اللغة العربية القياسية المعاصرة ضمن منظور نحو الحكم النحوي والربط ، كما ويتطرق إلى بعض الأفكار الأكثر حداثة التي نجدها في تشومسكي (١٩٩٥م)، ويوراجيركا (١٩٩٨م)، ومحمد (٢٠٠٠م). ينقسم البحث إلي قسمين أساسين: الأول، ويراجع بإيجاز أهم الدراسات السابقة التي تناولت هذه المسألة من وجهة نظر نحوية، في حين نحاول في القسم الثاني تأسيس رتبة موحدة للغة العربية القياسية المعاصرة وفق مقتضيات الحكم النحوي والربط.