

Arabic adjective words and classes and their complexity at the interfaces

Abdelkader Fassi Fehri, Linguistic Society of Morocco

Mohammed V University abdelkaderfassifehri@gmail.com

Arabic adjective words are built by using two main derivational processes:

- (a) From a *root* base, involving an acategorial ('unvocalized') item and an adjective/substantive pattern, which categorizes the root;
- (b) As a derived (already categorized) *noun* base plus an adjectivizer suffix (-*ii*).

The template or affix derivation processes correlate with the main semantic division into property concept or *quality* adjectives (Dixon 1982; = QA) and *relational* adjectives (Bally 1944; Gunkel & Zifonun 2008; Fabregas 2007 = RA); already distinguished in Arabic grammars as *hilyat* 'ornament; inherent property', or *sifat* 'quality' (Ibn Sarraj 10th c. [1985]), and *nisbat* 'relationship' (related to tribes, cities, persons, etc. Druel 2011).

QA, which represent prototypical adjectives (expressed in many forms; Fischer 2011), have two main root/template skeletons, which are most salient and productive: (a) *CaCiiC*, and (b) *CaCCaC*, as represented in (1) and (2), respectively:

- (1) a. *rajul-un ʔawiil-un /baʔiis-un*
man-nom tall-nom /miserable-nom
'A tall/miserable man'.
b. *l-jundiyy-at-u s-sajiin-at-u l-jariih-at-u*
the soldier-f-nom the-imprisoned-f-nom the-wounded-f-nom
'The imprisoned wounded female soldier'
- (2) a. *yawm-un ʔaswad-u*
day-nom black-nom
'A black day'
b. *rajul-un ʔahmaq-u ʔahdab-u*
man-nom crazy-nom hunchbacked-nom
'A crazy hunchbacked man'

The two skeletons above point in fact to two distinct subclasses of QAs, with distinct semantics: form (a) is dedicated to dimension, age, value, physical, speed, or human properties (or states), while form (b) is dedicated to colors and (human) defects or sicknesses. Note that form (b) is homonymous with comparative or superlative adjectives.

RAs have a distinct derivational route, and a distinct semantics. Their source is a noun (a category) which designates a thing or an *entity* as in (3), or an *event*(uality), as in (4):

- (3) *l-xatam-u d-dahab-ii ; l-laban-u l-ḥalab-ii*
the-ring-nom the-gold-en the-milk-nom the-Alepo-of
'The golden ring; the Alepo milk'
- (4) *r-radd-u l-ijtiyaah-ii ; l-xuṭṭa-t-u t-tanfidiyy-at-u*
the-response the-invasion-of the-plan-f.pl-nom the-executive-f-nom
'The invasion response; the executive plans'

Note that what we designate here as an event noun (the *masdar* of traditional grammar) is taken to be a deverbal noun elsewhere (Fassi Fehri 1990, 1993, Kremers 2007). Subclasses of QAs or RAs can be distinguished in terms of their 'internal' syntax and their thematic or argument structure, making use of one of the basic tenets of in ne-constructual grammars, and more specifically Distributed Morphology, namely the separation of Root Syntax and

Category Syntax (Hale & Keyser 2002). In (1), the adjective modifies the ergative subject, or the object of the transitive (in the absence of the external subject), respectively. We argue that these adjectives, being permanent (Jurjaanii 14th c. [1978]) or *non-episodic* (Fabregas (2020)), project no AspectP, in comparison to agent or patient participles which do (and may project Voice internally). Note that in (4), it is the event noun that is modified

‘External’ syntax of APs poses also numerous comparative and architecture challenges. For example, positioning of the adjective as prenominal or post-nominal is not correlated with the known attributive/predicative distinction, since both adjectives in Arabic (5) are post-nominal, in contrast to French or English, but only some can be predicative, as shown in (7):

(5) *l-mudiir-u l-farans-iiy-u s-saabiq-u*
 the-director-nom the-french-nom the-former-nom

‘The former French director’

(6) *l’ancien directeur français*
 the-former director French

‘The-former French director’

(7) a. *l-mudiir-u farans-iiy-un*
 the-director-nom french-nom

‘The director is French’.

b. * *l-mudiir-u saabiq-un*
 the-director-nom former-nom

Intended to mean: ‘The director is former’.

The attributive/predicative distinction is obtained in post-nominal position through ordering of adjective sequences in a mirror image order via head or phrasal movement (Fassi Fehri 1999; Fischer 2011; Shlonsky 2004 for Hebrew). But the prenominal order is mainly dedicated to superlative adjectives, which contrast significantly with comparatives (that are exclusively post-nominal; Fassi Fehri 1981, 2012):

(8) *haaḍaa ḥaḥlaa jabal-in*
 This higher mountain-gen
 ‘This is the highest the-mountain’.

(9) *haaḍaa l-jabal-u ḥaḥlaa min tubqaal-a*
 this the-mountain-nom higher than Toubqal-gen
 ‘This mountain is higher than Toubqal’.

Other scalar or quantity adjectives also occur pre-nominally, as in the following constructions (Bardeas 2008; Aamiri 2008):

(10) *ḥakal-tu laḍiīd-a t-taḥaami-i*
 ate-I delicious-acc the-food-gen
 ‘I ate the (most) delicious food’.

In a sense, prenominal adjectives are interpreted as superlative (with a hidden operator; compare with Hallman’s 2006 analysis of Syrian). This prenominal/ post-nominal contrast in Arabic is rather original, in comparison with the most known attributive/ predicative or intersective/non-intersective in Romance or Germanic. The description is still compatible, however, with adjective architecture in Zamparelli (1993), Cinque (2010), Rizzi & Cinque (2016), or Fabregas (2020), in which DegP or ScaleP are higher than prototypical or relative adjectives. Time permitting, the (non-) universality of the adjective category will be discussed. For the sake of concreteness, the contribution is implemented in a minimalist DM framework (Chomsky 1995, Halle & Marantz 1993, Harley 2014, Hale & Keyser 2002).

References

- Cinque, G. 2010. *The Syntax of Adjectives*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Chomsky, N. *The Minimalist Program*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Dixon, R. M. W. 1982. *Where have all the adjectives gone?* The Hague: Mouton.
- Fábregas, A. 2020. *Morphologically derived adjectives in Spanish*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Fassi Fehri, A. 1981. Free relatives and comparatives in Arabic. *Langues et Littératures* 1, 87-117. Rabat: Publications of the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences.
- Fassi Fehri, A. 1990. *Al-binaa? l-muwaazii* [Parallel Structures]. Casablanca : Toubqal Publishers.
- Fassi Fehri, A. 1999. Arabic modifying adjectives and DP structures. *Studia Linguistica* 53.2: 105-154.
- Fassi Fehri 2012. Key features and parameters in Arabic grammar. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hale, K. & S.J. Keyser. 2002. *Prolegomenon to a Theory of Argument Structure*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Halle, Morris, and Marantz, Alec. 1993. Distributed morphology and the pieces of inflection. In Hale, K. & S.J. Keyser eds. *The view from building 20*, 111–176. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.
- Hallman, P. 2022. Comparative constructions in Syrian Arabic. *Brill's Journal of Afroasiatic Languages and Linguistics* 14.2, 210-254.
- Shlonsky, U. 2004. The form of Semitic noun phrases. [114.12](#), 1465-1526