

An agree-based account of verbless copula sentences in Standard Arabic



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an account of Standard Arabic (SA) verbless copula sentences with a nominal or adjectival predicate (DP-DP and DP-AP structures) in terms of the basic notions of the Minimalist Program – Merge, Move and Agree. The proposed account posits a functional projection, nominal phrase (NomP) headed by Nom located between NP and TP. The functional head, Nom, in ways akin to C, T and *v*, serves as a Probe initiating an Agree relation with a nominal Goal complement which leads to valuing of nominative Case on the complement and of ϕ features on the Nom Probe. The initiated Probe-Goal relation observes the claims of Agree Theory in the sense that the relation holds at a distance without having to move the Goal from its base position. Further, the relation also observes the activity condition in that Nom is an active Probe by virtue of carrying uninterpretable ϕ features of person, number and gender, and the nominal predicate Goal is likewise active in view of its uninterpretable Case feature. It will be argued that the nominative Case in copular sentences is not a default Case but is the consequence of normal Agree. The analysis provides support for eliminating Case-driven movement and consequently eliminating the Spec head configuration requirement on Case assignment.

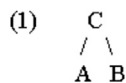
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1. Theoretical background

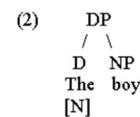
In this section, the key concepts of the Minimalist Program (MP) which will play an important role in the analysis will be introduced.

1.1. Select, numeration and merge

Within the Minimalist program ([10] and later work), the human language faculty consists of a lexicon and a derivational system. Two basic operations, Select and Merge, operate on a set of lexical items called Numeration to build syntactic structures in a successive binary fashion. Two instances of Merge are distinguished in Chomsky [14] – External and Internal. External Merge takes two separate linguistic expressions (A and B) from the Numeration and merges them forming a new unified expression (C):

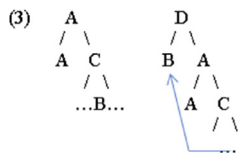


External Merge in this sense is a recursive structure-building process operating on linguistic items based on their selectional features. For example, *the* is a head carrying an uninterpretable nominal (N) feature which requires it to merge with an NP to form a DP. D's selectional feature is subsequently deleted. Another example is the modal head *can* with the selectional verbal feature (V) which determines its merger with a complement VP to form T' [33]. NP selection by D and their merger is diagrammed in (2):



Internal Merge, on the other hand, takes B which is already part of A as a result of External Merge, and re-merges it in a new projection – a specifier of A - at the edge or periphery of the new projection A. The operation is shown in (3):

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Internal Merge is displacement or Move understood within MP as moving a copy of B [11,13]. Internal Merge is triggered by the need to license the Edge Feature (EF) of functional heads, specifically phase heads.¹ This operation must apply early in the course of the derivation prior to Spell out and Transfer of the relevant structure to the phonological (PF) and semantic (LF) components.²

Within GB and the Principles and Parameters frameworks, it was assumed that the rule Move α moves any syntactic constituent anywhere at any point at any level of the system. Within the MP, however, movement is restricted and appealed to as a Last Resort³ to satisfy the EF of Tense in English for example. A central concept in MP is the economy of derivations and the economy of representations. Such considerations demand “that there ... be no superfluous symbols in representations ... or superfluous steps in derivations.” Chomsky and Lasnik [9]: 23. If formal features of Edge and Case can be accounted for in terms of External Merge only, such an account will be more compatible with the Least Effort Principle than an account which adopts both operations, External and Internal Merge (displacement).

The following subsection explains features and interpretability.

1.2. Features and their interpretability

An important concept in the MP is the distinction between features of functional and substantive categories. Functional and lexical categories have a bundle of features. Features on functional heads (ϕ features) such as person, number and gender are “formal features” ([11,13]: 10), and play no role in the semantic interpretation of such heads as C, T, and v at LF.⁴ That is to say they are uninterpretable, and therefore enter the derivation unvalued. Conversely, ϕ features on nominal elements are crucial for their semantic interpretation, and therefore enter the derivation valued. The Case feature on nominals appears to be a purely formal syntactic feature with no semantic role, and therefore uninterpretable at LF. Likewise, EF is another formal uninterpretable feature on phase heads which, when present, requires them to project a specifier to be filled by a constituent through Merge.

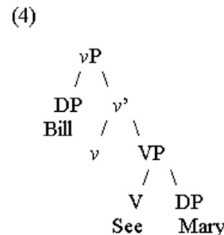
Both the Probe and the Goal must be active for Agree to apply and Case valuation to be achieved. The EF, however, is not valued via a Probe – Goal relation under matching, the way ϕ features and

Case are valued, but through Merge of a constituent in Spec T.

The other concept relevant to the analysis of NomP⁵ is the vP Shell discussed in the next section.⁶

1.3. vP shell analysis

Work within earlier versions of MP [10,43] has adopted the idea⁷ of splitting the VP structure into two projections: the inner core VP headed by the lexical verb and an outer vP headed by a functional verb v . The functional v , also known as a light v , takes the VP as its complement. This analysis is referred to in the literature as the vP Shell structure as one VP is embedded directly under a higher vP node. This is schematized in (4) below:



The internal theme argument *Mary* originates as a sister to V inside the lower VP and, under the VP-Internal Subject Hypothesis adopted by a number of researchers ([25,41,16]; among others), the external agent argument *Bill* originates within the projection of light v inside Spec v .⁸

The other fundamental concept discussed next is Agree, an operation which matches uninterpretable features with their interpretable counterparts.

1.4. Agree

A related key derivational operation in the MP is Agree. Agree establishes a relationship between a Probe and a Goal both of which must be active by having an uninterpretable feature or features.⁹ To value its unvalued uninterpretable features, the Probe searches for an active Goal in its C-commanding domain. Once the Probe locates the active Goal, the uninterpretable features of both the Probe and the Goal are valued under matching. This feature valuing is performed by means of Agree. For example, Agree between T and a DP Goal located in Spec v^* results in nominative Case assigned on that Goal and the ϕ features of T are assigned a value by those matching but valued features of the Probe; and Agree between v^* and a DP complement (Goal) results in accusative Case assigned to that DP Goal and, conversely, the ϕ features of v^* are assigned a value by

¹ CP and v^*P are identified as phases in Chomsky [11]; the argument being that both represent propositions. CP encodes tense and the illocutionary force while v^*P encodes argument structure. A phase head, like other functional heads, may have an EF which is a property indicating that a lexical head can be merged. This may result in an additional Spec on the phase's left periphery, acting as an escape hatch for displacement of constituents. By passing through this extra displacement-attracting intermediate Spec v position to higher positions outside the phase, a violation of the Phase Impenetrability Condition (PIC) is avoided (Cf. [12]: 108 for a formulation of PIC).

² Spell out and Transfer are technical terms for the operation whereby the syntactic structure, once completed, is submitted to PF and to LF.

³ Chomsky (1988, [10] refers to this as the Least Effort Principle the essence of which is “if there is no need to do, then don't do it.”

⁴ C, T and v do have other features, however, that play a role in their interpretation. C has discourse-related features such as topic and *wh*, T has tense and v has agentivity.

⁵ The idea that nominal phrases have a nominal head similar to v is not a new one; it has been proposed in Refs. [2,8,32,33]; as discussed in Section (2.2.1) below.

⁶ The relevance of the vP Shell analysis to the topic of this paper is as follows: just as VPs have a functional vP projection, so does nominal clauses include a NomP functional projection headed by Nom located between N and T.

⁷ The vP Shell analysis goes back to Larson [26] who refers to Chomsky [10].

⁸ The idea that the subject was actually in Spec, vP (rather than Spec, VP) was suggested later, not in the references cited since the little v head was introduced later.

⁹ For a proposal that the probe-goal relation results from the operation Merge, see Pesetsky and Torrego [31]. When Merge combines two elements, a probe-goal relation “must be established between these elements” (Ibid: 1). They call this the Vehicle Requirement on Merge (VRM) formulated as follows:

Vehicle Requirement on Merge (VRM)
If α and β merge, some feature F of α must probe F on β .

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