

# Verbal Clause

## 1. Introduction

The term 'verbal clause' (*jumla fi'liyya*) is taken from traditional Arabic grammatical theory, and is used in contrast to →nominal clause (*jumla 'ismiyya*). While the status of both terms in contemporary western linguistic theory is unclear, the verbal clause seems to have elicited less theoretical interest than nominal clauses have, except with relation to →agreement phenomena. This article presents a comparison of two different ways in which the term has been used, and then examines its role in the discussion of word order in Arabic, and how it is represented in different theoretical frameworks.

In what follows, 'SV' word order will be referred to as *agent-initial* (or A-initial) word order, in order to avoid taking sides in the theoretical debate over the structure of →nominal clauses, and, in particular, whether the S is actually a grammatical subject or a grammatical topic. Accordingly, the S in SV word order will be referred to as the 'initial agent'. VS word order will be referred to as 'verb-initial' (or V-initial) word order, in order to include within the category 'pro-drop' clauses with implicit or anaphoric subjects.

## 2. What is a Verbal Clause?

'Verbal clause' is used with at least two senses. Some sources use it to describe clauses in V-initial word order (c.f. Wright 1898 II:251; Cantarino 1977 I:41; Bakir 1980:125; Plunkett 1993, 1996; Bedawi et. al. 2004:344). Elsewhere, 'verbal clause' describes clauses that have a conjugated

verb stem as  $\rightarrow$ predicate, referred to here as 'verbally headed' (or V-headed) clauses (c.f. Abu-Haidar 1979:123; Rosenhouse 1984:127; Cowell 1964:407; Qafisheh 1977:203; Belyayeva 1990:52; Fassi-Fehri 1993:47,87; Shahin 2000:39; Al-Tamari 2002:9-10,35).

The V-initial sense or 'verbal clause' describes a clause the predication structure of which begins with a verb or, in some cases, a participle or adjective, all of which show some form of  $\rightarrow$ agreement marking ('predication structure' is used here to exclude discretionary expressions such as adverbs, as well as fronted question words and the like), and which either precedes an independent NP expressing its agent, or expresses its agent by means of  $\rightarrow$ agreement morphology.

In contrast, the predication structure of a nominal clause begins with a nominal expression (*'al-mubtada'* 'that which is begun with', referred to here as 'initial NP') of which the remainder of the clause (*'al-xabar* 'the news, report, comment,' referred to here as 'the report') is predicated. Also included in the contrast is the *locative clause* (*jumla qarfiyya* 'locative clause'), the nucleus of which begins with a locative prepositional phrase. The V-initial sense focuses on the order in which the elements of a predication are presented, and therefore may imply a theory of syntax concerned with 'information structure', namely, how syntactic structure encodes transactional or pragmatic meaning.

According to the 'V-headed' sense, a verbal clause is headed by a verb stem, regardless of its position relative to its agent argument. In contrast, a nominal clause is a copular clause ( $\rightarrow$ copula), the predicate of which is a  $\rightarrow$ noun phrase,  $\rightarrow$ verb phrase, or prepositional phrase. The contrast here is not between different orders of presentation, but rather between different kinds of predicate, and may imply a theory more concerned with thematic or descriptive meaning.

The V-initial usage treats (1-2) as verbal clauses, and (3-4) as nominal clauses, while the V-headed usage treats both (1-3) as verbal clauses, and (4) as a nominal clause:

- (1) *ʿabar-na t-ṭarīq-a l-ʿarīdat-a.*  
 cross.Perf.1p the-street-Acc the-wide.fs-Acc  
 "We crossed the wide street." (Bedawi, et. al. 2004:344)
- (2) *lam yatawāfar l-i hādāni š-šarṭāni*  
 neg.Past available.Imperf.3ms to-cl1s these.Dual the-conditions.Dual  
 "These two conditions were not available two me." (Bedawi, et. al. 2004:347)
- (3) *hādāni š-šarṭāni lam yatawāfarā l-i*  
 these.m.Dual the-conditions.m.Dual not.Past available.Imperf.3md to-cl1s  
 "These two conditions were not available two me." (Bedawi, et. al. 2004:347)
- (4) *ʿal-masʿalat-u basīṭat-un*  
 the-question.fs-Nom simple.fs-Nom  
 "The question is simple." (Bedawi, et. al. 2004:307)

From the perspective of contemporary western linguistics, the V-initial usage captures certain generalizations more perspicuously than does the V-headed usage, and draws finer distinctions between clause types. The first generalization is that initial NPs in clauses headed by any kind of predicate, whether verbal or otherwise, are interpreted as being 'specific' ( $\rightarrow$ specificity). Treating both copular clauses and A-initial clauses as kinds of nominal clause captures this restriction directly, while conflating clauses in A-initial word order with those in V-initial word order does not.

The second generalization is the celebrated  $\rightarrow$ agreement asymmetry between A-initial and V-initial clauses: in A-initial word order, the verb is inflected as matching the agent in gender and number, while in V-initial word order with an independent agent NP, the verb is inflected as matching the agent in gender only. This generalization is easily captured by treating A-initial and V-initial clauses as different types, whereas treating them as belonging to the same type requires auxiliary statements to capture the agreement asymmetry.

According to some theoretical analyses, even present-tense copular clauses ( $\rightarrow$ copula) include a  $\rightarrow$ verb phrase headed by an abstract or 'null' copula (c.f. Bakir 1980; Fassi-Fehri 1993; Eisele 1999: see Bemamoun 2000 for criticism), as in (5-6):

- (5) *'al-mas'alat-u basītat-un.*  
 the-question.fs-Nom simple.fs-Nom  
 "The question is simple."

- (6) [<sub>IP</sub> 'al- mas'alat-u [<sub>I'</sub> BE<sub>j</sub> [<sub>VP</sub> t<sub>j</sub> [<sub>V'</sub> basītat-un]]]]

This kind of analysis treats all Arabic clauses as verbal clauses, including those that do not contain a pronounced verb stem, with the consequence that the term 'verbal clause' becomes synonymous with the term 'clause' itself and makes no useful distinction between clause types. Accordingly, using 'verbal clause' for describing clauses in V-initial word order allows allows well-known generalizations about Arabic word order to be captured directly.

### 3. The Verbal Clause and Arabic Word Order

V-initial word order arises frequently in discussion of 'basic,' 'default,' or 'neutral' →word order in different varieties of Arabic (see →word order for discussion of these terms).

Where Standard Arabic is described as having a basic word order, it is almost always claimed to be V-initial word order (X above: c.f. Fassi-Fehri 1993; Mohammad 2000; Bedawi, et. al. 2004:345), although in some contexts, such as newspaper headlines, A-initial word order predominates (7: c.f. →word order; Dahlgren 1999; Bedawi, et. al. 1994:349).

- (7) *'iṣābat-un musallaḥat-un ta'sīru waḥdat-a ṣawārīḥ-a rūsiyyat-an.*  
 gang.fs-Nom armed.fs-Nom capture.Imperf.3fs unit.fs-Acc rocket-Gen Russian.fs-Acc  
 "Armed band captures Russian rocket unit." (Bedawi, et. al. 2004:349)

V-initial word order is also reported to be the basic order in dialects including Moroccan (Harrell: 1962-2004:160), Jordanian (Al-Haq 1992:2), varieties of Palestinian (Shlonsky 1997:7-8; Shahin 2000:38-39), Najdi Bedouin (Ingham 1994:38), and Syrian (Grotzfeld 1965:98-99). In these sources, A-initial word order is described as topicalization of the agent argument (Ingham 1994:38; Harrell 1962-2004:160; Shahin 2000:38-39), or as expressing a greater degree of 'emphasis' on the agent argument (Grotzfeld 1965:98-99; Abu-Haidar 1977).

For example, Harrell (1962-2004:160) reports that in Moroccan Arabic, the subject usually

follows the predicate in a simple sentence:

- (8) *žaw d-dyaf.*  
come.Perf.3ms the-guests  
“The guests have come.”

With regard to agent-initial word order, Harrel reports that “in many cases a noun which seems to be the subject of a following verb is separated from the verb by a slight pause and is to be interpreted as a predated topic rather than directly as the subject”:

- (9) *le-mğarřba, ka-yaklu tlata wella řeb‘a de-l-meřrat fe-n-nħař.*  
the-Moroccans asp-eat.Imperf.3p three or four of-the-times in-the-day  
“The Moroccans, they eat three or four times a day.”

A-initial word order is reported to be basic in dialects including Moroccan (Kortobi 1997:218; Benmamoun 2000.; in contrast to Harrell 1962-2004), Libyan Arabic (Owens 1984:212-215). El-Yasin (1991:18-121) presents an interesting argument in favor of treating A-initial order as basic in Northern Jordanian Arabic (spoken in the Irbid region of north-western Jordan). El-Yasin reports that both V-headed and copular clauses have a progressive limit on the number of initial NPs with which they can begin, with two being the largest felicitous number, three being deviant, and four entirely unacceptable. For example, the NP headed by *řullāb* 'students' in (10) is a single initial-NP. The paraphrases in (11-13) break up this complex NP into longer sequences of simpler initial NPs, with a corresponding reduction in acceptability:

- (10) [ *řullāb m‘allim midrast il-giryih* ] *mlāħ*  
students teacher school the-village good.mp  
"The village school's teacher's students are good."  
  
(11) [ *m‘allim midrast il-giryah* ] [ *řullāb-u* ] *mlāħ / rāħu ‘a-ř-řām*  
(12) ? [ *midrist il-giryah* ] [ *m‘allim-ha* ] [ *řullāb-u* ] *mlāħ / rāħu ‘a-ř-řām*  
(13) \* [ *il-giryih* ] [ *midrasit-ha* ] [ *m‘allim-ha* ] [ *řullāb-u* ] *mlāħ / rāħu ‘a-ř-řām*

Assuming that the NPs headed by *řullābu* "his students" in the copular versions of (10-13) are subjects (c.f. Jelinek 1981; Fassi-Fehri 1982; Eid 1991; Plunkett 1993; Mohammad 1998), El-Yasin

concludes from the fact that the two sentence types seem to tolerate the same number of initial NPs, that *tullābu* in the V-headed versions of (10-13) must be subjects as well, and that Northern Jordanian Arabic has A-initial word order as its basic word order. El-Yasin's argument rests on the assumption that the initial NPs in (10-13) are grammatical subjects. However, this assumption is not innocent, because, according to the V-initial usage of 'verbal clause', (10-13) are all nominal clauses. Therefore, El-Yasin's observation has no theory-independent implications about the word order in Northern Jordanian Arabic.

Some sources, rather than asserting that one word order or the other is basic, report variation between the two (e.g. Nablus Palestinian, Belyayeva 1995:52-53; Jordanian, Al-Haq 1992:2). The variation is often reported as being conditioned by various grammatical or pragmatic factors. The first of these is a generalization that has been made for several varieties of colloquial Arabic that V-initial word order is more common with verbs in the perfect stem, while A-initial order is more common with verbs in the imperfect (see →word order for discussion). This has been noted for Jordanian, Egyptian, Moroccan, Syrian, and Saudi Arabian (Al-Tamari 2001), Moroccan Arabic (Benmamoun 2000:62-63; 2003), Najdi Bedouin Arabic of Saudi Arabia (Ingham 1994:38-39), and Syrian Arabic (Cowell 1964:409; Ambrose 1977:79-81).

For example, Al-Tamari (2001:19-21) claims that, in Jordanian Arabic, agent-initial order (14) is preferred with a verb in the imperfect stem, whereas V-initial order is preferred with verb in the perfect stem (15), although the opposite word orders are acceptable with each:

- (14) *le-wlād b-yil'abu fi s-sāḥa*  
the-boys Indic-play.Imperf.3mp in the-field
- (15) *'akal Maher eṭ-ṭabīx*  
ate.Perf.3ms Maher the-food

Benmamoun (2003:759) suggests a historical explanation for the preference of V-initial word order with perfect verb stems. He notes that such preferences also arise in so-called “God-wishes” (after Ferguson 1993), in which a verb in the perfect stem precedes the subject, whereas

paraphrases of these expressions with verbs in the imperfect stems follows the subject, as in the following examples from Moroccan Arabic:

- (16) *ḡāzā-ka llah.*  
reward.Perf.3ms-cl.2ms God
- (17) *llah yḡazi-k*  
God reward.Imperf.3ms-cl2ms  
“May God reward you.”
- (18) *llah ybarik fī-k.*  
God bless.Imperf.3ms in-cl2ms
- (19) *bārak llahu fī-k*  
bless.Perf.3ms God in-cl2ms  
“May God bless you.”

Noting that formulaic expressions often retain properties of an earlier stage of a language, Benmamoun points to the parallel between V-initial word order and the word order in the →construct state. He suggests that this asymmetry may be a residue of a stage of pre-Classical Arabic, at which the perfective stems were verbal nouns that combined with their subjects in a construct state.

Another widely noted generalization is that A-initial word order disambiguates subjects and objects where the agreement form and meaning of the verb fail to do so. For example, Souag (2006:23-37) reports that, in the Dellys dialect of Algerian Arabic, the preference for SV in clauses containing independent NP objects in examples like (20) is "overwhelming".

- (20) *u-ḡūlba yəṭʿəllmu fī-ha l-qūrʿan.*  
and-students learn.Imperf.3p in-cl3fs the-Quran.  
“And students learn the Quran in it.”

In contrast, if the verb hosts an encliticized object pronoun, or if it is intransitive, V-initial word order is preferred (21).

- (21) *yəqraw fi-ha t-təlba.*  
read.Imperf.3p in-cl.3fs the-students  
“The study in it.”

Souag claims (p.23) that this alternation is not a matter of transitivity, because the unmarked position for the subject of both intransitive verbs and transitive verbs hosting object clitics is following the verb.

Blau (1960:207-208), analyzing data from the Bir Zeit Rural Palestinian Arabic (Schmidt and Kahle 1918, 1930), notes that the grammatical ambiguity between the subject and object is resolved through the use of agreement marking on the verb (which indicates the agent), and, particularly through the use of "linear-progressive word order" placing the agent before the object. He notes that, perhaps for this reason, A-initial word order "becomes ever more frequent," although V-initial word order is still quite ordinary. Very similar generalization are reported by Abu-Haidar (1979:126) in the Baskinta variety of Lebanese Arabic, and by Al-Tamari (2003) for Jordanian.

An even more important influences on word order is the discourse genre in which a sentence is uttered, and the kind of information that the sentence contributes to the discourse. Numerous sources reports indefinite or referentially non-specific subject NPs tend to follow the verb, including Damascene Syrian (Cowell 1964:407-411; Ambrose 1977:79-81), Nablus dialect of Palestinian Arabic (Belyayeva 1990) and Gulf Arabic (in particularly Bahraini, Qafisheh 1977:202-203). This correlates with the strong tendency in Arabic for new information to be expressed later in sentence (Moutaouakil 1989), and for indefinite NPs to express new information, whether introduced as a new discourse topic, or as background information (c.f. Brustad 2000).

A very widely noted generalization is that V-initial word order expresses particular kinds of 'information structure', meaning that it is used to express particular instructions about how the descriptive information expressed in a clause is to be incorporated into a discourse context. V-initial word order, and particularly in the case of 'pro-drop' clauses, is used to introduce an event into a discourse, and is most frequently used to describe sequences of events in narrative genres, such as



story-telling or news reporting (Khan 1988; Moutaouakil 1989; Fakhri 1995; Dahlgren 1999; Brustad 2000).

This very broad overview shows that, although both A-initial and V-initial word orders are asserted as being basic in various dialects, both are attested, and the preference for one or the other is affected by a variety of grammatical and pragmatic factors. In general, V-initial word order, and hence verbal clauses, retain a number of functions both grammatically and pragmatically. These include:

- (i) Expressing existential or presentative predication;
- (ii) Expressing new-information focus on the subject or on the sentence as a whole;
- (iii) Introducing an eventuality into a discourse;

The fact that V-initial word orders are used for multiple functions suggests that verbal clauses as a sentence type are still alive and well in the Arabic dialects, however different theoretical frameworks and methodologies may analyze them. As Brustad (2000) notes: "[V-initial] typology can be shown to be prominent in spoken Arabic narratives, and remains a basic word order of the language" (p.328).

## 5. The Verbal Clause in Contemporary Syntactic Theory

Verbal clauses have uncertain status in contemporary western syntactic theory. Some analyses that make use of non-headed or 'flat' structure derived from context-free rewrite rules, such as in (22), that contrast with a rule for nominal clauses such as (23: subscripted *subj* and *obj* indicate non-case-marked NPs, and subscripted *case* indicating any case-marking):

- (22)  $S \rightarrow V \quad (NP_{subj}) \quad (NP_{obj})$   
 $S \rightarrow V \quad (NP_{case})^*$
- (23)  $S \rightarrow NP_{nom} \quad V \quad NP_{obj}$

This approach is found in earlier stages transformational grammar (c.f Bakir 1980; Jelinek 1981), in Lexical Functional Grammar (Al-Haq 1992), and in Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar

(Chahristan 1991; Moosally 1994; Borsley 1995; Beller 2007). Each of these approaches allows verbal clauses to be identified with a particular rule schema, and therefore to be represented directly as a theoretical concept, rather than merely as a descriptive label.

In the Government & Binding and Minimalist traditions (c.f. Chomsky 1981, 1986, 1995, 2000, 2001), the verbal clause has no independent theoretical status (c.f. Mohammad 1989, 2000; Eid 1991, 1993; Bahloul and Harbert 1993; Aoun, et. al. 1994; Benmamoun 1992, 2000; Fassi-Fehri 1993; Ouhalla 1994; Diesing and Jelinek 1995; Shlonsky 1997; Harbert and Bahloul 2002, a.o.). A major reason for this is that these frameworks make extensive use of 'null' or unpronounced abstract structure, and as such, 'word order' as it is traditionally known does not correspond directly to constituent order (c.f. Kayne 1994; Chomsky 1995:334; Zubizarreta 1998; Kremers 2003).

In these frameworks, it is almost universally assumed that the underlying structure of a verbal clause like (24) is a structure like (25), from which V-initial word order is derived by head-movement of the verb to the head of an inflectional projection (26: →verb phrase). A-initial order is then derived by further movement of the subject NP into the IP projection (27):

- (24) *yuḥibbu* 'amr-un 'alā'-an.  
 3.love.Imperf.ms Amr-Nom Alaa'-Acc  
 "Amr loves Alaa'."
- (25) [<sub>IP</sub> I [<sub>VP</sub> 'amr-un [<sub>V'</sub> *yuḥibbu* 'alā'-an ]]]
- (26) [<sub>IP</sub> [<sub>I</sub> I *yuḥibbu*<sub>i</sub> ] [<sub>VP</sub> 'amr-un [<sub>V'</sub> t<sub>i</sub> 'alā'-an ]]]
- (27) [<sub>IP</sub> 'amr-un<sub>j</sub> [<sub>I'</sub> I *yuḥibbu*<sub>i</sub> ] [<sub>VP</sub> t<sub>j</sub> [<sub>V'</sub> t<sub>i</sub> 'alā'-an ]]]

How these movement operations are motivated varies from proposal to proposal, but they share the implication that a verbal clause is one in which raising of the verb to I is motivated while raising of the subject is not. A verbal clause then describes the pronounced word orders resulting from derivations of this kind.

A variation on this approach reduces all verbal clauses to A-initial order, by supposing that in V-initial order, an abstract or 'null' expletive pronoun is present in the IP projection, and that the agreement marking on the verb is 'split' between the expletive pronoun and the subject NP (c.f. Mohammad 1990, 2000):

(28) *yaltamisu il-luġawiyyūna tafsīr-an.*

see.Imperf.3ms the-linguists.mp.Nom explanation-Acc

"The linguists are seeking an explanation." (Bedawi, et. al. 2004:352)

(29) [IP pro<sub>3P</sub> [<sub>I'</sub> *yaltamisu*<sub>j</sub> [<sub>VP</sub> *il-luġawiyyūna*<sub>3M</sub> [<sub>V'</sub> t<sub>j</sub> *tafsīr-an*] ] ] ]

According to this approach, verbal clauses do not exist as a particular kind of syntactic structure, but rather are simply an artifact of how the structure is pronounced or 'spelled-out' (see also Aoun and Benmamoun 1999; Benmamoun 2000, 2003; Benmamoun and Lorimor 2006 for a more recent variation on this approach).

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