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Grammar, Style, and Discourse An Empirical Look at Modern Standard Arabic Complementation in the Newspaper, Al-Ahram

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Complementation is the process whereby a sentence is nominalized and placed syntactically where one would normally expect a noun or noun phrase. The subordination of sentences to the role of substantives within matrix sentences appears to be a universal feature of natural languages. It also appears that most if not all languages have more than one way of constructing such subordinate clauses, and that the syntactic constructions or particles which signal complementation do not occur in free variation. (Andersson, 1975)

Semantic, as well as syntactic factors, appear to be the organizing principles behind the distribution of complement clauses and constructions. To these, as this study attempts to demonstrate, we may probably add pragmatic and discourse constraints.

Like many facets of language and other human behavior which offer a choice between forms of expression, complement choice is an issue whose underlying motivation is not readily nor easily articulated. Such matters which often express slight nuances in meaning difference are often labeled "style" and shelved. However, as Bolinger notes, "a difference in syntactic form always spells a difference in meaning," or at least a "potential contrast" which may not always be operational but is at the speaker's disposal to exploit. (1968) However complex the grammar of complement choice is, the native speaker rarely, if ever, err in his choice of complementizer particle or construction.

The Arabic Language is certainly no exception. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) has four common complementizer particles which do not share the same distribution. Traditional Arab grammarians, Arabists and Orientalists, and descriptive and applied linguists have made some comments on the distribution of these particles. However, there is as yet no clearly articulated explanation, that is indeed possible.

Although MSA is primarily a written language, native speakers (or writers?) still have a feeling for correct usage and for formal and informal style. In any case, native Arabic speakers appear to be consistent in choosing what is considered as the correct complement type in a given situation, whether written or spoken.

Review of the Literature

In early generative syntactic works complementizers were characterized as meaningless, insignificant particles. (For discussion see Bresnan, 1970) The first generative syntacticians to specifically discuss the relationship between syntactic and semantic phenomena were Kiparsky and Kiparsky (1971; for discussion, see Kuno, 1978); they discussed the role of factivity and presupposition in the English complementation system. They found the verb or predicate to be a deciding factor in complementation choice. This discovery necessitated one of the many major revisions in the generative grammar framework in order to allow transformations to apply across clause boundaries, something previously prohibited. This was only the beginning of the constantly expanding generativist scope. Generative syntax led to a realization that semantics played a greater role in syntactic choice than had previously been assumed. It was soon discovered that "supra-segmental regularities could not be reconstructed by traditional morphological and syntactical tools." (Rieser, 1978:7) This in turn led to a much heightened interest in Discourse or Textlinguistics, and Generative Discourse.

The Kiparskys' study (1971) sparked considerable interest in English complementation. Not only did they posit factivity and presupposition as factors influencing complement choice, they also found that a certain semantic class of "emotive" verbs such as "bother," "alarm," "regret," and "intend" affect the choice of complement type. For example, non-factive verbs require extraposition of the subject complement:

It makes sense that John has come. (factive, John has actually come)
That John has come makes sense.
It seems that John has come. (non-factive, John may or may not have come.)
*That John has come seems. (1971:366)

The troublesome English complement "for-to" construction turns out to be at least partially restricted to emotive predicates such as "important," "relevant," and "unlikely" and verbs such as "bother," "regret," and "prefer" which express the "subjective value of a proposition rather than knowledge about it or its truth value." (1971:363)

It's important for him to come. (emotive)
*It's well-known for him to come. (non-emotive)

Kiparsky and Kiparsky concluded that they had barely scratched the surface and had presented "an unfortunately oversimplified picture of a series of extremely complex and difficult problems." (1971:364)

Karttunen (1971) took the Kiparskys' study one step further in showing that it is not only the main verb that affects complement choice, but the mood of the matrix sentence as well as the type of the complement clause. For example, he found that no difference in meaning exists between that-complements and poss-ing complements in the indicative mood. However, the subjunctive mood requires that-complements to be factive while poss-ing complements may be fictitious.

That his bride is not a virgin would bother Harry if he knew about it. (*Luckily she is a virgin.)
His bride's not being a virgin would bother Harry, if he knew about it. (Luckily she is a virgin.) (1971:60-1)

Similar constraints have been found in other languages such as Swedish (Andersson, 1975) and Japanese (Joseph, 1976). For example, in Japanese matrix verb preference for a certain complementizer is not idiosyncratic but due to "semantic compatibility." A number of Japanese predicates occur with either a factive or a non-factive nominalizer "resulting in a subtle, yet significant, difference in meaning." (1976:316) Verb tense, semantic content of the subordinate clause, and the degree of abstractness of the proposition also play an important role in governing complementizer choice.

Givon has attempted to show that complement and infinitive clauses, and causative constructions are all part of a much larger typological continuum found in natural languages. This he demonstrates with data from languages as diverse as English, Spanish, Finnish, Krio (an English creole), Ute, Persian, Bemba (Bantu), Sherpa, Hebrew and Palestinian Arabic. (Givon, 1980)

Arabic Language

Modern Standard Arabic has four complementizers, 'an, 'anna, 'inna, and ma which are found in what appears to be complementary distribution (with a limited set of possible exceptions in one environment). Basically, 'an is followed by a subjunctive verb, though occasionally by a perfect form; 'anna is followed by a noun or pronoun and 'inna is the same as 'anna except that it always comes after the verb qaala when it is functioning as a complementizer. The particle ma is less specific as to the complement tensed clause that follows it. In many instances these particles (with the exception of 'inna) and their complements may be replaced by a verbal noun construction, e.g.:

hal turiidu 'an tusaafira 'ila 'amriika?
Do you want to travel [that you travel] to America?

hal turiidu as-safar 'ila 'amriika?
Do you want to travel [the traveling] to America?

Discussion of these particles' syntactic function and their variability with verbal noun constructions go back as far as the 10th century grammarian Sibawaih (Mosel, 1975) and are basically descriptive and/or prescriptive as to their use (Peterson, 1972). The same arguments were adopted by some of the Western orientalists. Arab grammarians divided sentences into two different types, verbal and nominal. Verbal
sentences begin with a verb; nominal sentences begin with a noun or pronoun. The same sentence can be made verbal or nominal by permuting subject and verb. In an orientalist's grammar (Brockelmann, 1909) we find reference to 'anna, 'an and ma as particles which allow a sentence to serve as a part of another sentence. Particle choice is explained as being a function of the type of sentence to be embedded, i.e. if it is a nominal sentence then 'anna is the correct particle. Verbal sentences are preceded by 'an. This explanation is borrowed from the Arab grammarians and conveniently dispenses with a discussion of why one sentence would be subject first and another verb first. This explanation poses no problem for the native Arabic speaker who already knows intuitively which type of particle and clause follow which verbs and predicates, but it contains little insight for the second language learner or linguist in knowing why which verbs or predicates take which type of complementizer particle and clause type. From a more Western perspective a British introductory Arabic text states it thus: "If a subordinate clause after 'an is a factual statement and not a wish or purpose it is turned into a nominal clause and introduced by the conjunction 'anna 'that." (Cowan, 1958:94)

Cantarino's Syntax of Modern Arabic Prose (1974) lists and discusses in detail all of the complement construction types which he found in selections from various authors in three advanced Arabic readers. However, he has purposely limited his study to the literary language and left out journalistic sources, considering them unworthy of study. As a result, though his examples express the richness and variety of the language, they are not necessarily representative of common usage. I am unaware of any corpus-based study which attempts to account for the frequency and distribution of complement clause constructions in Arabic.

Among the clearest statements concerning the distribution of these particles is the popular Arabic textbook, Elementary Modern Standard Arabic which states:

The basic difference in meaning between 'anna-'inna on the one hand and 'an on the other is the difference between fact and possibility. A clause introduced by 'anna or 'inna describes a fact, or something which has actually occurred or is occurring, or something which it is assumed will occur, and may often be translated "the fact that...". A clause introduced by 'an, however, generally refers to a possible event, one which is perhaps desired, or feared, but one which may or may not be realized. Such clauses commonly are found in expressions such as "It is necessary (proper, desirable, etc.) that...", or "I want..." or "He ordered that...". (Abboud & McCarus, 1983:429-30)

This explanation purports to account for the distribution of the particles in a general manner, but there is no reference as to when or why a verbal noun might be preferable to a temporal clause, or vice versa. There does not appear to be a simple, straight-forward relationship in MSA to the notion of factivity and presupposition proposed by the Kiparskys' (1970) and expanded on by others (Bresnan, 1970; Karttunen, 1971). For example, the Kiparskys' list "believe" as a non-factive; however, in MSA it is treated as a factive in that it takes an 'anna complement. It is interesting to note that Japanese allows either a factive or non-factive complement with verbs such as "believe," "doubt," and "report." MSA treats similar statements as factives. The factor governing the choice of particles in these particular instances in Japanese appears to be presupposition versus assertion. (Josephs, 1976)

The particle 'an is called 'an almaSdariyya (the infinitival 'an) by the Arab grammarians; the same applies to the complementizer ma, ma almaSdariyya. This does not apply to 'anna and 'inna. The Connectors in Modern Standard Arabic, a text for advanced second language learners, claims "the 'an clause can always be transformed into a verbal noun, while [the] 'anna clause may sometimes be transformed into a verbal noun but not always." (1984:129) A beginning text states that, "it is often possible and frequently better style to avoid using the subjunctive [which follows the particle 'an ] by using the verbal noun." (MECAS, 1965:81).

A contrastive study of the English and Arabic verbal tense systems mentions that although theoretically 'an followed by an imperfect form of the verb can be transformed into a verbal noun, "...in fact, as we have just seen, certain verbs have certain preferences, and sometimes one form is preferable to the other." (Kharma, 1983:48) For examples he gives:
yuHamalu an tumTira Gada.
It is expected to rain [that it rains] tomorrow.

which he claims is "almost never" rendered into a verbal noun phrase. On the other hand,

huwa @aazimun/muSamnimun @ala dhdhahaabi
He is determined to go [set on (the) going].

is much more common than a complementizer and tensed clause.

Research Question

This paper is a preliminary report on a larger study constituting my MA Thesis research. The purpose of the study is to investigate Modern Standard Arabic complementation in a selected corpus in order to discover the syntactic, semantic, discourse and pragmatic factors which govern the distribution of complementizer particles and their variability with verbal noun constructions. In particular, the variability between the particles 'an and 'anna will be examined and a list of verbs and predicates compiled according to those which take 'an as a complementizer, those which take 'anna, those which allow both and the factors which govern the choice of one or the other. Verbal nouns will be counted and examined to determine why they were chosen over a temporal clause preceded by a complementizer. In addition, I want to see if there are statistically significant patterns of frequency of distribution of complement types according to genre. In this paper I will concentrate on some factors which govern the choice of complement types and verbal noun constructions in newspaper Arabic.

The corpus for this paper was restricted to texts from the Egyptian newspaper, Al-Ahram, an official government publication which is considered to be among the best newspapers in the Middle East. For a newspaper, it's style of language is generally well-respected, but not literary. The corpus consists of texts totaling approximately 4500 words. Tokens of complementizer particles and of verbal noun constructions were counted. They were analyzed according to construction type, grammatical function in the matrix sentence, verb or predicate they complemented, tense, factivity, type of text they occurred in, and topic continuity in an attempt to account for factors influencing complement type distribution.

Discussion

Syntactic Constraints

Cantarino (1974) mentions that an 'an clause cannot be preposed. Sibawaih also mentioned that an 'anna clause could not be sentence initial, otherwise it could be confused with 'inna (indeed). (Mosel 1975) There were no incidents of sentence initial complementizer particles in the corpus.

Another item mentioned by Cantarino (1974) was that although nominalized clauses act like nouns they may not serve as the head noun in the construct state. There were no incidents of this in the corpus. They may however serve as the second term in the construct state, e.g.

saafarat Gayra annahu baqiya.
She traveled however he remained.

However, this does not appear to be a productive category, it being limited apparently to idiomatic uses which constitute what corresponds to subordinate conjunctions.

Semantic Constraints

As mentioned, Kharma (1983) notes that certain verbs have certain preferences for predicate types. An obvious example of this is the verb qaala (to say). In the corpus, the complement of qaala was always a temporal subordinate clause. There were 35 occurrences of the verb with a complement: 32 times it was followed by 'inna and could be construed as indirect discourse. Twice the subordinate clause was introduced
only with a colon, and once there was only the following clause with nothing to introduce it. These instances appeared to be direct quotes. In other words ‘inna seemed to be the complementizer for indirect discourse only. This appears to be a significant change in use. In Classical Arabic, ‘inna was the particle for introducing direct discourse.

In the corpus were verbs such as *tamma* (to become complete) which took only verbal noun clauses as their complement. For example,

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tamma-littifaqu bayna miSra wa-l@iraq....
The agreement between Egypt and Iraq took place....
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A native speaker judge, and professor of Arabic and Linguistics, said that *tamma* could not take a complementizer and clause as a complement subject. This is regardless of the fact that there is a definite verbal nature to its verbal noun complement, i.e. often both subject and object are expressed. It seems that verbs like *tamma* and *’ajra* (to cause something to take place or happen) take verbal noun complements, however *Hadalha* (to occur) allows (requires?) an ‘*an* clause:

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Hadalha ‘*an* rakabtu taksiyan....
It happened that I rode a taxi....
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It is not clear why verbs of an apparently semantically similar category allow different complement types. (It may be that these are not necessarily of the same semantic category: *tamma* seems to emphasize the result or completed nature of the proposition while *Hadalha* seems to emphasize the action of the proposition. Hence, it is logical that the latter would take a tensed clause while the former prefers a more nominal construction.)

**Discourse Constraints**

There were definite patterns in the corpus in the distribution of complement types according to discourse or text type. There were no occurrences of complementizer particles in headlines; the only complements consisted of verbal noun constructions. This is logical as headlines have space constraints and so require conciseness and brevity. Verbal noun constructions dispense with complementizers as well as tense and person markers, and often subjects, objects and sometimes even prepositions which usually accompany the verb.

News shorts, short filler articles, also used very few complementizer particles. They too appear to share similar constraints with headlines, i.e. brevity and conciseness. In one news short consisting of 74 words there were 7 verbal noun constructions with only one tensed clause introduced by a complementizer. Of the complement clauses in news shorts 11% were tensed clauses with a complementizer and 89% were verbal noun constructions. In the entire corpus there were 3.27 tokens of complementizer particles/100 words of text. In news shorts the average dropped to .96/100 words.

Lead front page articles consisted of 27% ‘*an* clauses, 40% ‘anna clauses and 33% ‘inna clauses. There is a definite preponderence of ‘*anna* and ‘inna clauses on the front page, particularly considering that in the total corpus the breakdown was 41% ‘*an* clauses, 37% ‘*anna* clauses and 22% ‘inna clauses. 80% of all ‘*anna* clauses and 94% of all ‘inna clauses in the corpus appeared in front page lead articles as opposed to only 45% of the ‘*an* clauses. This seems to correspond to the nature of front page articles. The front page generally consists of directly and indirectly reported speech and factive statements. These types of clauses are introduced by ‘inna and ‘*anna*. Speculation, wishing, persuasion and moralizing (non-factives) are kept to a minimum. Such clauses are usually (always?) introduced by ‘*an* .

The opposite is true for the editorial page. Among the purposes of editorials is persuasion, wishing, speculation and moralizing. Here we would expect to find more ‘*an* clauses and less factives, and in fact we do. Of complement clauses introduced by complementizers in editorials, 66% were ‘*an* clauses, 30% were ‘*anna* clauses and only 3% (one token) were ‘inna clauses. In short, there was a considerable difference between the distribution of the complementizer particles on the front page and those on the editorial page.
A further discourse function of the particle 'anna appears to be the introducing of a new subject or topic. 65% of the 'anna clauses introduced a new subject or topic. At first glance it appears that 45% of the 'an clauses introduce a new subject or topic. However, on closer inspection, we find that a third of these are factive 'an clauses (Cantarino equates 'an as the default complementizer, i.e. it can be factive, particularly in adverbial temporal clauses). If we subtract these tokens then only 30% of the 'an clauses introduce a new subject or topic. This patterning in the distribution of complement types corresponds to syntactic constraints on the particles. 'anna clauses require an expressed subject. 'an clauses must be followed by a verb (the subject may or may not be expressed). Clauses introduced by 'an follow verbs such as modals and hence there is equi-NP deletion, e.g.

arada ar-rajul 'an yaddhab.
'He wanted to go.'

Contributions

This study will hopefully result in a more accurate description of the Modern Standard Arabic complementation system. In particular, we will know the distribution of clause types and verbal noun constructions according to specific verbs and predicates in the genres represented in the corpus. This will be helpful for second language learners, as well as teachers and text-writers, in gaining a better understanding of the nature of the particles and constructions they are attempting to acquire. It is possible that existing guidelines for using these particles may need to be revised or added to.

In addition, we will hopefully come to know more about discourse and pragmatic constraints on style. This will complement research previously done on the relative frequency of Verb-Subject-Object versus Subject-Verb-Object word order in Modern Standard Arabic. In a corpus-based study of MSA prose it was found that word order varied significantly according to genre. (Parkinson, 1981) Empirical studies such as these are significant not only for scholars of Arabic, but for linguists in general interested in empirical descriptive data.

Delimitations

This study has not attempted to draw a definite line between verbal nouns which are functioning with some verbal force and those that are to be perceived as concrete nouns. Rather, they have been treated as a continuum which can be quantified by breaking them down into categories of those with an expressed subject or object and those without (the latter appear to be more nominal than verbal). Educated native speaker judgements have been relied on. I have done this for two reasons: First, educated native speakers are the ones who actually write (or speak) MSA. It would make for a very interesting study to look at uneducated speakers' intuitions about MSA. The question of the colloquial reflexes of the complement structures investigated will be left to future research.

Bibliography


