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The Role of Topic in the Development of Subject-Verb Agreement in Arabic

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In a paper entitled "Topic, Pronoun, and Grammatical Agreement," Givón makes the rather strong claim "that verb agreement paradigms always arise from anaphoric pronoun paradigms." (1976: 180, emphasis his) According to this view, subject-verb agreement affixes result from a process of "de-marking," in which a topicalized subject noun phrase (NP) loses its "marked" status and becomes re-analyzed as simply the subject, while the anaphoric pronominal copy left behind by topicalization of the subject NP is re-analyzed as subject agreement and is cliticized to the verb, as illustrated in (1) below:

(1) Topic Shift ("Marked") Neutral (Re-analyzed)

| TOP PRO | The man, he came | SUBJ AGR'T | The man he-came |

Givón's analysis predicts that, in Arabic for example, sentences like those in (2) below will be found to have derived historically from something like the hypothetically corresponding constructions in (3):

(2) a. 'al-waladu māt - a  
the-boy 3m.sg. died-3m.sg. (As for) the boy, (he) died.'

b. 'al-wuzara’u qām - ū 
the-ministers 3m.pl. arose-3m.pl. (As for) the ministers, (they) arose.'

c. 'al-bintu tā - ktub - u d - darsa
the-girl 3f.sg.-write-indic. the-lesson (As for) the girl, (she) writes/is writing the lesson.'

d. 'an-nisā'u ya - ḍhab - na 
the-women 3rd-go-f.pl. (As for) the women, (they) go/are going.'

(3) a. 'al-waladu₂, māt huwa₂ ( Çalış 'al-waladu)

b. 'al-wuzara’u₂, qām hum₂ ( Çalış 'al-wuzara’u)

c. 'al-bintu₂, hiya₂ ktub-u d-darsa (< 'al-bintu ktub-u d-darsa)

d. 'an-nisā'u₂, hunna₂ ḍhab (< 'an-nisā'u ḍhab)
According to Givón, the agreement affixes in (2) above (-ā, -ū, ṭā-, and ya-...-na) must have originated in the anaphoric pronominal copies in (3) (respectively, huwa, hum, hiya, and hunna), or at least in some such series of anaphoric pronouns. The model suggested by Givón encounters serious difficulties in Arabic and the other major, historically attested Semitic languages, as discussed at some length in Russell (1977: 69ff.). Without going into the details of that discussion here, the principal difficulty with Givón's analysis as applied to Semitic has to do with the fact that, contrary to his claim (1976: 183) of a "regular etymological relationship" between "the [third person] imperfect prefixal agreement" and "the anaphoric pronoun series of Semitic" (as implied by the Arabic examples in (2-3)c,d above), no such relationship has been, nor is soon likely to be, demonstrated for Semitic. Nor do the third person perfect suffixes of Semitic (as in the Arabic examples (2)a,b above) bear an "unmistakable relationship to some pronominal series" of Semitic, as claimed by Givón (p. 183). The third person perfect suffixes of Semitic seem, rather, to have their origins in the system of nominal declension and modification and not, apparently, in any known or reconstructed pronominal series.

While the claim of a specific etymological relationship between the verbal agreement affixes and the anaphoric pronouns of Semitic is probably untenable, it is nevertheless true of these languages that facts relating to topicalization have played a central role in the development and application of subject-verb agreement. The balance of this paper will be devoted to an examination of certain aspects of that development within Arabic.

It is a well-known fact of Arabic that verbs in the language are inflected to agree with their subjects in person, number, and gender, subject to certain conditions. Verb agreement with first and second person subject NPs in both number and gender is quite regular and presents no particular difficulties. In the third person, however, there are, broadly speaking, two different kinds of agreement irregularities: those that are, for want of better terms, lexically and/or morphologically conditioned and those that are syntactically conditioned. It is the latter, or syntactically conditioned, variety of agreement irregularity that is of central concern in this paper. Consider, for example, the following sentences:

(4) a. kataba / *katabū l-wuzarā'u t-taqrīra
   wrote(3m.sg.)/(3m.pl.) the-ministers the-report
   'The ministers wrote the report.'
   b. 'al-wuzarā'u katabū / *kataba t-taqrīra
   '(As for) the ministers, (they) wrote the report.'

(5) a. sa - tadxulu / *-yadxulna l-banātu buyūta-hunna
   fut.-enter(3f.sg.)/(3f.pl.) the-girls houses-their(f.pl.)
   'The girls will enter their houses.'
   b. 'al-banātu sa -yadxulna/*-tadxulu buyūta-hunna
   '(As for) the girls, (they) will enter their houses.'
In predominantly VSO Classical Arabic, verbs generally agree strictly with following subject NPs only in person and (usually) in gender, as in (4,5)a above, whereas in the corresponding structures in (4,5)b, in which the subject precedes the verb, the verb agrees also in number. As observed even by the medieval Arab grammarians, however, the latter SVO structures are relatively "marked" in that the sentence-initial NP (or 'al-mubtada') of such sentences must generally be morphologically or syntactically definite, or perhaps more accurately, it must be definite in the sense of being discourse-anaphoric, generic, or otherwise uniquely identifiable with its referent. The characteristics just mentioned are, of course, essentially those that have been identified as necessary properties of the "theme" or "discourse topic" in many other languages, and it is for this reason that 'al-mubtada' has come, in recent Arabic grammatical literature, to be regarded generally as the "theme" or "topic" of a Classical Arabic sentence, and that SVO (as well as OVS, etc.) sentences in Arabic have often been referred to as "topic-comment" clauses related to their corresponding VSO sentences by a process of thematization or topicalization.

On the basis of such facts, it may be inferred that subject-verb agreement in number, at least, is "triggered" in Classical Arabic by the occurrence of a preceding thematic or topicalized subject NP, in contrast with the failure of such agreement to occur in the more neutral verb-initial structures, the subject NPs of which are generally nonthematic.

Notwithstanding the general suspension of number agreement in VSO structures of Classical Arabic, a number of examples are recorded in which, exceptionally, the verb does agree with a following plural subject in number as well as in gender and person, an "error" repeatedly condemned by, among others, the noted eighth-century grammarian, Sībawayhi. The Arab grammarians generally appear to have regarded this as an aberrant feature of one or another (usually Hijāzī) dialect. That dialect variation in this matter should have existed is not at all surprising, as there is still some variation among the modern Arabic dialects with respect to the details of number agreement. In any event, it is probably safe to assume, with Rabin (1951: 168) that "the strict observance of the rule that the verb of a verbal [i.e. verb-initial] sentence must be in the singular was a peculiarity of those dialects that formed the base of Classical Arabic."

It is interesting to note, however, that those examples of VSO with number agreement that have been cited by Wright (1898: 294), Reckendorf (1921: 25), and others are, almost without exception, ones in which the subject NP was at least "thematizable"---i.e. was either anaphoric, generic, or otherwise uniquely identifiable with its referent. Consider, for example, the following sentences.

(6) 'akal - ū - nīl-barāgī'ī-u
   ate-3m.pl.-me the-fleas
   'The fleas devoured me.'

(7) turik - na nisā'u-kum
   forsaken(pass.)-3f.pl. women-your(m.pl.)
   'Your women have been forsaken.'
Although information on the dialects in question is relatively scanty, the rather conspicuous absence of examples of number agreement in VSO structures with indefinite, nonthematic subject NPs suggests at least the possibility that such constructions were ungrammatical in those dialects. Also, it is not possible to determine with certainty whether both post-verbal as well as pre-verbal thematic subjects obligatorily triggered number agreement in the dialects in which sentences like those in (6-9) occurred.

The facts of number agreement in modern Egyptian Arabic, however, are suggestive in this connection. Unlike Classical Arabic, modern Egyptian Arabic has become predominantly SVO in surface structure, regardless of the definiteness or specificity of the subject NP, while VSO structures have survived as a relatively marked pattern, usually involving stress on the verb. Furthermore, the verb in Egyptian Arabic generally agrees in number with its plural subject whether the latter precedes the verb (as in the (a) sentences of (10-11) below) or follows the verb (as in the corresponding (b) sentences):

(10) a. il-wuzara katabu / *katab (i)t-ta'ri'ir
    the-ministers wrote(3c.pl.)/(3m.sg.) the-report
    'The ministers wrote the report.'

         b. katabu / *katab (i)l-wuzara t-ta'ri'ir
            'The ministers wrote the report.'

(11) a. il-mudarrisin dol gum / *geh
    the-teachers these came(3c.pl.)/(3m.sg.)
    'These teachers came.'

         b. gum / *geh il-mudarrisin dol
            'These teachers came.'

Moreover, number agreement generally occurs whether the subject NP is definite, as in the examples just cited, or indefinite and nonthematic, as in the following examples:

(12) a. talat awlad xaragu / *xarag
    three boys went out(3c.pl.)/(3m.sg.)
    'Three boys went out.'

         b. xaragu / xarag talat awlad
Notice, however, that most speakers of Egyptian Arabic optionally use or accept singular verbal agreement with plural subject NPs, but only if (a) the subject is indefinite (i.e., presumably, nonthematic) and (b) the verb precedes the subject, as in (12-13)b above.

From all of the foregoing, the historical "drift" of number agreement in Arabic begins to suggest itself. At some early, pre-classical stage of Arabic, number agreement seems to have been restricted to sentences with a thematic or topicalized subject in initial position, as also in Classical Arabic. In addition to its obligatory occurrence in SVO structures, number agreement in some dialects at least would then appear to have become optional in VSO structures as well, provided the subject was anaphoric, generic, or otherwise uniquely identifiable with its referent.

At some point, number agreement must then have become obligatory for all definite (or at least thematic) subjects, whether in SVO or VSO sentences, and, eventually, optional even for indefinite, nonthematic subjects in VSO structures. In dialects (such as Egyptian Arabic) which have become predominantly SVO in surface structure, number agreement has become generalized to both SVO and VSO sentences, regardless of whether their subjects are thematic or nonthematic. An earlier, intermediate stage in the generalization of subject-verb number agreement is thus reflected, perhaps, in the limited occurrence of VSO sentences in Egyptian Arabic in which, exceptionally, number agreement is suspended.

The somewhat hypothetical development just outlined may be summarized roughly as follows:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Number Agreement between Subject and Verb in Arabic</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Stage I</td>
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<td>Stage IV</td>
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In terms of number agreement, then, the dialects upon which Classical Arabic was based were essentially at Stage I in the process outlined in (14); the dialects to which Ṣibawayḥi and others referred (i.e. the so-called lugat 'akalūnī l-barāqīṭu) might have been somewhere between Stages II and III; and dialects like modern Egyptian Arabic are clearly
at Stage III or beyond.

The word-order-related facts of gender agreement in Classical Arabic also lend some support to the rather speculative reconstruction in (14). As mentioned above, while number agreement in Classical Arabic generally does not occur in VSO sentences, gender agreement between subject and verb usually does occur in such sentences. However, in some verb-initial sentences, according to Wright (1898: 288ff.), masculine singular agreement may optionally occur with grammatically feminine subject NPs, although feminine agreement is "preferable," especially if the subject NP refers to persons of the female sex. Thus, for example:

(15) a. hadar - a 1-qādiya ('i)mra'atun
came(before)-3m.sg. the-judge woman
'A woman came before the judge,'

b. ...walad - a 1-'uxaytila 'ummu saw'in
gave birth (to)-3m.sg. 'al-'Axtal mother(of) evil
'A bad mother gave birth to that poor 'al-'Axtal.'

c. ...'imra'an ǧarr - a - hu 1 min - kunna wāhidatun
man deceived-3m.sg.-him. of-you(2f.pl.) one(f.)
'...a man, whom one of you has deceived.'

d. qāl - a niswatun fī 1-madīnati
said-3m.sg. women in the-city
'(Some) women in the city said...'

In sentences like (16)a,b below, on the other hand, gender agreement must occur between the verb and its feminine subject NP, according to Wright:

(16) a. jā' - at hindun
came-3f.sg. Hind (feminine proper noun)
'Hind came.'

b. qāl - at (')imra'atu 1-Cāzīzi
said-3f.sg. wife 'al-Cāzīz
'The wife of 'al-Cāzīz said...'

Although Wright does not mention the fact explicitly, the sentences in (15)a-d above all differ from those in (16)a,b in that the subject NPs of the former are all indefinite and nonthematic. Those of (16)a,b, on the other hand, are both definite, and presumably thematizable, NPs.

Actually, examples may be found in which definite, feminine subject NPs take masculine verbal agreement in VSO sentences, but, again according to Wright (1898: 291), "such instances...are comparatively rare."

The above examples suggest, therefore, that when the suspension of gender agreement does occur optionally in VSO sentences, it is generally in sentences the subject NPs of which are indefinite and nonthematic. Meanwhile, gender agreement in VSO sentences with definite, thematizable
subject NPs (as well as, of course, in SVO sentences) is largely obliga-
tory.

On the assumption that verbal agreement in both gender and number was originally triggered only by an immediately preceding thematic subject, 17 then the subsequent generalization of third person subject-verb agreement to VSO structures in Arabic would appear to have begun (in some dialects, at least) with gender agreement, if Classical Arabic is any indication. While number agreement in Classical Arabic was still at Stage I of the process hypothesized in (14) above, gender agreement had apparently already progressed as far as Stage III.

In conclusion, it seems clear that subject-verb agreement, in Arabic at least, is not merely a matter of mechanically locating the appropriate subject NP and copying its features of person, number, and gender onto the verb, but the process must also be sensitive to features of the subject NP deriving from its function within the discourse---i.e. it must be sensitive to whether the subject is definite or indefinite, or has thematic properties or not. The apparently word-order-based suspension of number or gender agreement in Arabic is thus determined, in at least some varieties of Arabic (including Classical and modern Egyptian Arabic), not only by the relative order of subject and verb, but also in part by these same discourse-related factors.18

A number of questions must, of course, remain for further research: such as, for example, the question as to why number agreement seems so much more apt to be suspended in VSO structures than does gender agreement; or, viewed diachronically, why is it that gender agreement seems to have become generalized within Arabic to a greater extent, and at a faster pace, than number agreement? If, as suggested by Greenberg (1963: 93-5), agreement between subject and verb in number is relatively more "central" to language in general than is agreement in gender, it seems rather unusual that, as in Arabic, number agreement tends more frequently to be suspended than does gender agreement.19

Finally, the tentative nature of the reconstruction in (14) above must be re-emphasized. Its corroboration or disconfirmation must await fur-
ther historical research, comparative as well as internal to the various dialects of Arabic. It is intended merely as a working hypothesis to guide further research into an area of Arabic historical syntax that warrants reappraisal, as well as to suggest potentially interesting lines of research into similar phenomena in languages other than Arabic.20
NOTES

*This paper presents, in somewhat modified form, results that were reported in the author's dissertation, Word Order and Discourse Function in Arabic (Harvard University, 1977), much of the research for which was accomplished with the generous support of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U. S. Department of State, in the form of a grant administered by the American Research Center in Egypt.

1See Givón 1976: 154ff.

2The forms here listed are, of course, the nominative third person pronouns (masculine singular and plural and feminine singular and plural, respectively) of Classical Arabic. The common gender dual form (humā) was not included in the examples cited, for reasons of space.

3The first and second person verbal affixes are probably relatable to the corresponding independent pronouns (see Brockelmann 1908: 297, 300 and Russell 1977: 73ff., but also Nöldeke 1904: 28, who is skeptical of the supposed relationship between the first person affixes and pronouns). It is the third person or "anaphoric" forms, however, which are crucial in the consideration of agreement, and the third person imperfective agreement affixes are not at all clearly relatable to any series of anaphoric pronouns heretofore attested or reconstructed for Semitic.

4See Russell (1977: 75ff.) for a more detailed discussion, including an examination of relevant facts from ancient Egyptian.

5Lexically or morphologically conditioned irregularities have received relatively more attention in the literature than have the so-called syntactically conditioned irregularities. For details of subject-verb concord in Classical Arabic, see, for example, Wright (1898: 288ff.), and for certain aspects of gender-number concord in Modern Literary Arabic, see Killean (1968). See also Wise (1972; 1975: 171ff.) and Mitchell (1973) for treatments of some of the corresponding facts of modern Egyptian Arabic.

An example of what is meant by lexically or morphologically conditioned agreement irregularity is given in (i) below:

(i) a. ta- mā 1- qulūbu wa 1- uyūnu nādir- at-un
   3f.sg.-be blind the-hearts and the-eyes seeing-3f.sg.-nom.
   'The hearts are blind while the eyes are seeing.'
   (Wright 1898: 296)

   b. 'al-qulūbu ta- mā wa 1- uyūnu nādir-at-un
   '(As for) the hearts, (they) are blind, while the eyes are seeing.'

The Arabic forms for 'hearts' and 'eyes' in (i) above are plurals of the "broken" or "pattern replacement" type. In the examples given, the verb ta- mā takes feminine singular agreement with the inanimate broken plural
('a)l-qulūbu, the singular of which (qalb-) is nevertheless grammatically masculine. ('a)l-uyunu, also a broken plural, triggers feminine singular agreement in its predicate as well. Unlike qalb-/qulūb-, however, the singular of uyun- (namely, ñayn-) is grammatically feminine. In Arabic and most of the other Semitic languages, terms for paired parts of the body are generally treated, for agreement purposes, as feminine, in spite of their being formally unmarked for gender. The distinction between the kind of irregularity exemplified in (i) above and that which is syntactically conditioned will become clear as the latter is discussed in the text of this paper.

6 The description of syntactically conditioned agreement irregularities presented here applies not only to Classical Arabic, but in general also to Modern Standard Arabic. The latter represents, essentially, a continuation of the classical language of the Koran and of the pre-Islamic poets, and the so-called 'literary Arabic' of medieval prose and poetry. Such differences as do exist between Classical and Modern Standard Arabic are confined, for the most part, to minor features of style, and to the area of the lexicon, where Modern Standard Arabic has added a large number of lexical items and idioms peculiar to our modern era of expanded technology and communications, and has, at the same time, lost an equally large number of archaic, poetic forms. In overall grammatical structure, however, the language has been artifically frozen during its transmission over the years and, except where noted otherwise, the syntactic phenomena discussed in relation to Classical Arabic are also characteristic of Modern Standard Arabic as well. See, for example, Stetkevych (1970).

7 For a discussion of 'al-mubtada', and of occasional exceptions (usually involving contrast or heavy emphasis) to the requirement that it be "definite," see Russell (1977: 37ff.). See also Wright (1898: 251ff.), Ibn Hišām (ca. 1350: 424-5), etc.

8 See, for example, Kuno (1972).

9 See, for example, Lewkowicz (1971) and Anshen and Schreiber (1968). In spite of articles such as those just cited, however, there has been little, if any, substantive discussion of the properties of thematic or topicalized NPs specifically in Arabic, other than to observe, for example, that such NPs are generally "definite."

10 For a more detailed discussion, see Russell (1977: 65ff.).

11 Such usage was disparagingly referred to as lughat ʻakalū-nî 1-barāghīth, or "the language of 'the fleas devoured me'" (see example (6) in the text for an analysis of the sentence on which this term was based. See also Rabin 1951: 168 and Wright 1898: 294c).

12 Abdo (1973: 71) lists several examples of verbal sentences with number agreement, two of which involve indefinite subject NPs. In one case, however (sentence (i) below), a specific group of people had been under discussion, and so the subject 'many of them,' although morphologically indefinite, was still partly anaphoric and perhaps for that reason triggered number agreement in the verb. In the other case (sentence (ii) below), the indefinite subject mala'ikatun ('angels') may perhaps
be part of the permanent registry of discourse along with God, the sun, 
the moon, the stars, and other similarly highly presupposed objects, and 
may, therefore, have triggered number agreement in the verb, in spite 
of its being indefinite:

(i) Qumma cam - ā wams - ā kaqirun min-hum
then became blind-3m.pl. and became deaf-3m.pl. many of-them
'Then many of them became blind and deaf.'

(ii) ya - taqab - āna fī - kum malā'ikatun
3rd-follow in succession-m.pl. in-you(m.pl.) angels
bi - l - laylī wa malā'ikatun bi - n - nahārī
by-the-night and angels by-the-day
'Angels are sent to you one after another by night and by day.'

13 Chapter three of Russell (1977) contains extensive discussion of con­
trasting word order patterns and function in Classical Arabic and modern 
Egyptian Arabic.

14 Also in ancient Egyptian, taken by many to be the most closely related 
of the Hamitic languages to Semitic, it is only in the old perfective 
forms in which subject-verb agreement occurs. The old perfective, of 
course, is also the only construction in strongly VSO ancient Egyptian 
in which a nominal subject immediately precedes the verb. In all other 
narrative verb forms of ancient Egyptian, there is, strictly speaking, 
no agreement between subject and verb. See, for example, Gardiner 

15 Noun phrases may, of course, be syntactically "definite" without 
necessarily being "thematic." For example, in a sentence like: "It is 
the students who suffer," the underlined NP, although definite by virtue 
of the attached article, is not thematic, but is focused upon in the 
sense of what Kuno (1972) has described as "exhaustive listing."

16 Actually, it would be difficult, in principle, to demonstrate conclu­
sively that the optional suspension of number agreement in modern 
Egyptian Arabic reflects an earlier stage in the development of the 
language, since it is also possible that the phenomenon is due at least 
in part either to the influence of Modern Standard Arabic upon speakers 
of colloquial Egyptian (not very likely if illiterate speakers of 
Egyptian Arabic exhibit the same optionality) and/or to other, perhaps 
typological factors. In any event, whatever the actual details of the 
development of number agreement in Arabic, thematic properties (or the 
lack thereof) in the subject NP seem clearly to have been involved.

17 The assumption that subject-verb agreement in the earliest stages of 
Arabic was triggered only by an immediately preceding thematic subject 
is fairly safe, not only from the point of view of evidence internal to 
Arabic, but also from the perspective of the situation in ancient 
Egyptian (see note 14 above).
Greenberg (1963: 93) has claimed that "when number agreement between the noun and the verb is suspended and the rule is based on order, the case is always one in which the verb precedes and the verb is in the singular." (his "Universal 33") In Arabic, however, as in many other languages, the relative order of subject and verb is itself strongly related to discourse function (see, for example, Russell 1977). While it is not being claimed that the conditioning of subject-verb agreement by discourse factors is necessarily universal, there are, nevertheless, some interesting parallels in English (as well as in other languages, perhaps) which might bear further investigation. Although prescriptive grammarians might decry the suspension of number agreement in sentences like (i)a below, such usage is very common in numerous dialects of English, and is certainly preferable, in the same dialects, to the suspension of number agreement in sentences like (i)b, in which the plural subject precedes the verb. When, however, the subject is definite or has other thematic properties, the suspension of number agreement is much less likely to occur, even when the verb precedes the subject:

(i) a. There is/was three boys at the door to see you.
   b. *Three boys is/was at the door to see you.

(ii) a. *Is the three boys cub scouts?
   b. *The three boys is cub scouts.

(iii) a. *Is all of you going?
   b. *All of us is going.

That Greenberg regards number to be somehow more "central" to language than gender may be inferred from his "implicational universals," especially the following:

"Universal 32. Whenever the verb agrees with a nominal subject or nominal object in gender, it also agrees in number." (1963: 93)

"Universal 36. If a language has the category of gender, it always has the category of number." (1963: 95)

The logical possibility exists, of course, that subject-verb agreement in Arabic was, contrary to the reconstruction in (14), applicable in both SVO and VSO sentences at the earliest stages of the language, and that the suspension of that agreement progressed to varying degrees within subsequent dialects of the language. This is not, however, very likely in light of other facts of the development of number and gender agreement within Arabic, and in light of the evidence of ancient Egyptian (see notes 14 and 17 above).
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