

Arabic Nominal Clauses

Frederick Hoyt

University of Texas at Austin

Summary: *Nominal clauses* are Arabic clauses in which the first constituent in the clause is a *noun phrase* ->, called the **mubtadi**³ (or *initial NP*), of which the remaining sub-constituent of the clause, called the **ḡabar** (or *report*), is predicated. The term *report* applies to three types of clauses which differ according to the type of category they are headed by and the kind of relationship between the report and the initial NP. Grammarians have debated whether the initial NP has the properties of a subject or topic, with the consensus seeming to be that different kinds of nominal clauses require different analyses.

1. Introduction

Nominal clause (**jumla 'ismiyya**) is the Arabic term for clauses in which a nominal expression (Arabic **mubtadi**³, 'that which is begun with, inchoative') is followed by another constituent (Arabic **ḡabar**, 'report, announcement') which is predicated of or comments on the first. **Mubtadi**³ and **ḡabar** are translated here as *initial NP* and *report* respectively. The *report* constituent has two basic types. The first is a complete *verbal clause*-> containing a pronoun (Arabic **rābiṭ**, 'binder, connector') which 'resumes' or is bound by the initial NP as in (1) and (9) below. The second type is headed by a non-verbal predicate such as an adjective (14a), participle (14b), preposition (14c), or noun phrase (14d). The initial NP must also be definite or *specific*->. Nominal clauses with verbal reports have two further subtypes: those in which the initial NP is

construed as the subject of the verb (1), and those in which the initial NP is construed as an object or oblique argument of the report (9) or possibly as an argument of a more deeply embedded clause (11).

Western grammarians have studied whether initial NPs in these different kinds of nominal clauses can be analyzed uniformly as either *subjects* or *topics*, or whether the different types require different analyses. The consensus seems to be that in some nominal clauses the initial NP is a topic, while in others it is a subject. However, certain recent studies suggest that at least some initial NPs that appear to be topics may also have subject properties.

2. Nominal Clauses with Verbal Reports

The first major category of nominal clauses are those in which the report constituent is a verbal clause->. There are two subtypes: those in which the initial NP is construed as the subject of the verb, and those in which it is construed as a more oblique argument.

2.1 Nominal Clauses with Initial Subjects

The first subtype of verbal report takes the initial NP as its subject (referred to here as *initial subjects*):

- (1) a. ʔal-awlādu laʕibu kurat-a l-qadam.
 the-boys.Mpl-nom play.perf.3Mpl ball-acc the-foot
 'The boys played football.'
- b. ʔal-banāt-u yadrusna l-qawāʕid-a
 the-girls.Fsg-nom study.imperf.3Fpl.indic the-grammar
 'The girls study grammar.'

Some grammarians analyze initial subjects as *left-dislocated* from a subject position inside the report and occupying an external position where they are construed as *topics* (Bakir 1980; Fassi-Fehri 1988, 1989, 1993; Ouhalla 1988, 1991, 1994; Demirdache 1991; Plunkett 1993, 1996).

Others argue that initial subjects are not topics, but rather are in a pre-verbal subject position (Mohammad 1988, Mohammad 1990, Bolotin 1995, Benmamoun 2000, Mohammad 2000, Bahloul & Harbert 2002).

Four generalizations are at stake:

- (2) a. Like other initial NPs, the initial subject must be definite or specific;
- b. The dependency between an initial subject and the subject position of the report is more local than are dependencies between non-subject initial NPs and their **rābiṭ**-pronouns;
- c. The initial subjects, like other initial NPs, must precede *fronted* constituents such as question-words or prepositional phrases;
- d. In Standard Arabic, initial subjects control full *agreement*-> on the verb, while a post-verbal subject controls only gender agreement.

The two approaches focus on different subsets of (2a-d).

2.1.1 The Left-dislocation Approach to Initial Subjects

Treating initial subjects as left-dislocated topics accounts for (2a,c,d). According to this approach, the agreement marking on the verb, and in particular non-singular number marking, is an incorporated pronoun which acts as the **rābiṭ** for the initial subject. This neatly captures (2d), a well-known contrast in the 3rd-person paradigm between initial subjects and post-verbal subjects (see *agreement*->). Post-verbal subjects control only agreement in gender, the verb being marked in the singular (3), while initial subjects control full agreement in gender and number (4):

- (3) a. jāʾat il-banāt-u.
come.perf.3Fsg the-girls.Fpl-nom
"The girls came."
- b. *jiʾna l-banāt-u.
come.perf.3Fpl the-girls.Fpl-nom
- (4) a. ʾal-banāt-u jiʾna.
the-girls.Fpl-nom come.perf.3Fpl
"(As for) the girls, they came."

- b. *ʿal-banāt-u jiʿna.
the-girls.Fpl-nom come.perf.3Fpl

The analysis captures (2c) by predicting data reported by Bakir (1980) and Fassi-Fehri (1982, cited by Plunkett 1993:243-244) which show that the initial subject must precede fronted elements (see also Lalami 1997 for Moroccan Arabic):

- (5) a. ʿaṭ-ṭullābu, mata ḡahabu ʿila l-iʿrāq?
the-students.Mpl-nom when go.perf.3Mpl to the-Iraq
'The students, when did they go to Iraq?'
(Bakir 1980:128)

- b. *mata ʿaṭ-ṭullābu ḡahabu ʿila l-iʿrāq?

Assuming that left-dislocated NPs occupy a position in the phrase structure higher than and to the left of the position occupied by fronted constituents, these facts show that initial subjects are left-dislocated. (2a) is easily captured by the left-dislocation analysis, because a simple constraint can be stated for all initial NPs requiring them to be definite or *specific*->.

2.1.2 The Pre-verbal Subject Approach to Initial Subjects

The competing approach to initial subjects treats them as subjects proper because they behave more like English subjects than topics. Mohammad (2000) argues that point (2b) shows that a different kind of dependency holds between an initial subject and the subject position in which it is construed than holds between a non-subject initial NP and its **rābiṭ**.

For example, in (4), **ʿal-ʿijtimāʿ**, 'the meeting', is construed as the subject of the embedded verb **ḡasala**, 'took place.' In (6a) it is an initial subject taking the clause headed by **ḡasala** as its report, while in (6b) it is the post-verbal subject position. This complement clause is itself embedded within the interrogative clause headed by **tatasāʿalu**, 'wonders':

(6) qālat zaynab-u ḥanna-ha tatasāʾalu...
say.perf.3Fsg Zainab.Fsg-nom that-pn3Fsg wonder.imperf.3Fsg.ind
 'Zainab said that she wonders..

a. [man ḥiddaʿa ḥanna ḥal-ḥijtimāʿ-a ḥasala fi baġdād-a].
who claim.perf.3Msg that the-meeting.Msg-acc happen.perf.3Msg in Baghdad-gen
 ... who claimed that the meeting took place in Baghdad.'

b. [man ḥiddaʿa ḥanna fi baġdād-a ḥasala ḥal-ḥijtimāʿ-a].
who claim.perf.3Msg that in Baghdad-gen happen.perf.3Msg the-meeting.Msg-acc

(7a-b) are variations on (6a-b) with left-dislocation of ḥal-ḥijtimāʿ. (7a) is acceptable while (7b) is not. The dependency in (7a) between ḥal-ḥijtimāʿ-u and the *rābiṭ*-pronoun crosses the wh-island headed by *tatasāʾalu*. In contrast, the unacceptable (7b) associates ḥal-ḥijtimāʿ-u with the post-verbal subject position of *ḥasala*, the unacceptability apparently being due to the dependency crossing the wh-island boundary:

(7) ḥal-ḥijtimāʿ-u₁ qālat Zaynab-u ḥanna-ha tatasāʾalu
the-meeting.Msg-nom say.perf.3Fsg Zainab.Fsg-nom that-pn3Fsg
wonder.imperf.3Fsg.ind

a. [man ḥiddaʿa ḥanna-hu₁ ḥasala fi baġdād-a].
who claim.perf.3Msg that-pn3Msg happen.perf.3Msg in Baghdad-gen

b. *[man ḥiddaʿa ḥanna fi baġdād-a ḥasala _₁].
who claim.perf.3Msg that in Baghdad-gen happen.perf.3Msg
 'The meeting, Zeina said that she wonders who claimed that it took place in Baghdad.'

If agreement marking on the verb functions as a *rābiṭ*-pronoun, as claimed by the left-dislocation approach, then (7b) should be acceptable, because it should be the same kind of island-crossing dependency as seen in (7a). Mohammad takes the unacceptability of the example to indicate that

initial subjects are not left-dislocated from the post-verbal subject position, but rather are associated with it by NP-raising.

This is supported by data from Bakir (1980:162-163), showing that a sentence with two initial NPs of the same number and gender can only be construed with the second initial NP as the subject of the verb:

- (8) fātimat-u hind-un raʿat-ha.
Fatima.Fsg-nom Hind.Fsg-nom see.perf.3Fsg-pn3Fsg
'Fatima, Hind saw her.'
* 'Hind, Fatima saw her.'
(Bakir 1980:163)

The potential ambiguity caused by the identical gender and number values for the two initial NPs is resolved by interpreting the second initial NP as a non-dislocated subject.

2.2 Topicalization and Nominal Clauses

The second subtype of verbal report constituents do not take the initial NP as subject, but rather associate with a resumptive pronoun in some more oblique position. Clauses of this type are often analyzed as involving *left-dislocation* of the initial NP. This means that the initial NP is 'dislocated' to a position outside of the clause where it fills discourse role (such as *topic* or *focus*) rather than an argument or thematic role (such as *subject*, *object*, or *oblique*). It is *linked* or *bound* to a **rābiṭ**-pronoun occupying an object or oblique position within the report constituent:

- (9) (Bakir 1980:60-61)
- a. hind-un, samiʿa-ha muḥammad-un.
Hind.Fsg-nom hear.perf.3Msg-pn3Fsg Mohammad.Msg-nom
'Hind, Mohammad heard her.'
- b. ʾaš-šāriʿ-u, qābaltu sālīm-an fī-hi.
the-street.Msg-nom, meet.perf.1sg Salim.Msg-acc in-pn3Msg
'The street, I meet Salim on it.'

- c. fātimat-u ʾištāraytu kitāb-a-ha l-ams-a
Fatima.Fsg-nom buy.perf.1sg book-acc-pn3Fsg the-yesterday-acc
 'Fatima, I bought her book yesterday.'
- d. ʾal-muʿallimūna ḍahabu ʾila buyūt-i-him.
the-teachers.Mpl.nom go.perf.3Mpl to houses-gen-pn3Mpl
 'The teachers, they went to their houses.'

Clauses can contain more than one left-dislocated NP, showing that one nominal clause can take another nominal clause as its report constituent:

- (10) a. hind-un, sālim-un, taḍribu-hu.
Hind.Fsg-nom Salim.Msg-nom beat.imperf.3Fsg-pn3Msg
 'Hind, Salim, she beats him.' (Bakir 1980:165)
- b. muḥammad-un, ʾas-sayyārat-u, ʾuḫt-u-hu, bāʿa-ha la-ha.
Muhammad.Msg-nom the-car.Fsg-nom sister.Fsg-nom-pn3Msg sell.perf.3Msg-pn3Fsg to-pn3Fsg
 'Mohammad, the car, his sister, he sold it to her.' (Bakir 1980:169)

Left-dislocation of the initial NP has been analyzed as 'base generation' of the initial NP into the left-dislocated position (Bakir 1980; Ayoub 1981; Fassi-Fehri 1982, 1988, 1991, 1993; Plunkett 1993; Lalami 1997). The binding relationship between the initial NP and its **rābiṭ**-pronoun is then established by a coindexing rule. This is motivated by the insensitivity of the relationship between the initial NP and the **rābiṭ** to syntactic island constraints (Ross 1967), such as the *complex-NP constraint* (11a) or the *wh-island constraint* (11b):

- (11) a. zayd-un, ʾaḍunnu r-rajul-a [llaḍi ʾintaqada-hu ʾintaḥara].
Zaid.Msg-nom believe.imperf.1sg.ind the-man.Msg-nom rel.Msg
criticize.perf.3Msg-pn3Msg commit:suicide.perf.3Msg
 '(As for) Zaid, I believe that the man who criticized him committed suicide.'
 (Mohammad 2000:68)
- b. ʾal-walad-u tasāʾaltu [man raʾā-hu].
the-boy.Msg-nom wonder.perf.1sg who see.perf.3Msg-pn3Msg
 '(As for) the boy, I wondered who saw him.'
 (Mohammad 2000:67)

Island-sensitivity is widely assumed to be diagnostic of syntactic movement, so the dependencies in (9) show that the initial NPs are not associated with their **rābiṭ**-pronouns by movement, and so must be base-generated in the left-dislocated position.

However, Aoun & Benmamoun (1997), Aoun, Choueiri & Hornstein (2001), and Aoun & Li (2003) provide evidence from Lebanese Arabic showing that initial NPs which are in island-violating dependencies should be distinguished from those which are not. This is because an initial NP in an island-compliant dependency can be interpreted in the position occupied by its **rābiṭ**-pronoun. To illustrate, in (12) the possessive pronoun inside the initial NP **talmīz-a**, 'her student', is interpreted as bound by the quantificational NP **kəll mʿallme**, 'every teacher':

- (12) talmīz-a š-šitān btaʿrfo ʔənno kəll mʿallme ʔāṣaṣət-o
student.Msg-pn3Fsg the-naughty.Msg ind-know.imperf.2P that every teacher.Fsg
punish.perf.3Fsg-pn3Msg
 'Her₁ naughty student, you know that every teacher₁ punished him.'
 'You know that every teacher punished her naughty student.'
 (Aoun & Benmamoun 1998:580)

This is an example of syntactic *reconstruction*, a process which is also taken to be diagnostic of syntactic movement.

By contrast, when the initial NP is separated from its **rābiṭ**-pronoun by a syntactic island, the reconstructed interpretation is not available and the pronoun must be assigned an interpretation from the context:

- (13) talmīz-a š-šitān fallayto ʔablma kəll mʿallme tʔāṣəṣ-o.
student.Msg-pn3Fsg the-naughty.Msg leave.perf.2P before every teacher.Fsg
punish.imperf.3Fsg-pn3Msg
 'Her₂ /*₁ naughty student, you know that every teacher₁ punished him.'
 (Aoun & Benmamoun 1998:580)

The conclusions are that at least some initial NPs are moved into the initial position, and that the resumptive pronouns they bind are not independent constituents but rather pronounced traces of movement.

3. Copular Clauses

The second major category of nominal clauses are those in which the *report* constituent is headed by non-verbal predicates, such as adjectives (14a), participles (14b), prepositions (14c), and nouns (14d):

- (14) a. ^ʕīsa ṭawīlu ṣ-ṣabr.
Isa.Msg long.Msg-nom the-patience
 'Isa is very patient.'
- b. ḫalīl-un nā'im-un fi l-bayt-i.
Khalil.Msg-nom sleep.act:part.Msg-nom in the-house-gen
 'Khalil is sleeping in the house.'
- c. jareš fi šamāl-i ġarb-i l-^ʔurdan.
Jareš in north-gen west-gen the-Jordan
 'Jareš is in the north-west of Jordan.'
- d. dayzi l-^ʔamīr kātibat-un ^ʕirāqiyat-un
Daisy al-Amir writer.Fsg-nom Iraqi.Fsg-nom
 'Daisy al-Amir is an Iraqi writer.'

Clauses of this type are often called *copular clauses*.

In copular clauses, the *report* constituents are lexical or simplex predicates lacking a subject argument. For this reason, the initial NPs are usually analyzed as subjects because they 'saturate' the predicate (Jelinek 1981, 1983; Fassi-Fehri 1982; Eid 1991; Plunkett 1993; Mohammad 1998; Eisele 1999 treats them as left-dislocated). Furthermore, as noted by Fassi-Fehri (1982: cited by Plunkett 1993), unlike initial subjects with verbal *report* constituents, the initial NP in a non-verbal predication can follow a question word:

- (15) a. kayfa l-jaw-u fi š-šitā^ʔ-i?
how the-weather.Msg-nom in the-winter-gen

'How is the weather in the winter?'

(Plunkett 1993:245)

b. *ʔal-jaw-u kayfa fi š-šitāʔ-i?

Nonetheless, initial NPs in copular clauses must be still definite or *specific*->.

An important subtype of copular clauses for this debate are those in which the report is a definite noun phrase. These are referred to as *equational clauses*, and require that the initial NP and the report be linked by a 'pronoun of separation' (Arabic **ḍamīr il-faʕl**), also referred to as a 'copular pronoun':

- (16) a. Marwan-un huwwa ṭ-ṭawīl-u.
Marwan.Msg-nom pn.3Msg the-tall.Msg-nom
'Marwan is the tall one.'
- b. ʔal-ḥaqīqat-u hiyya ʔanna-ni lam aqraʔ il-wājib-a.
the-truth.Fsg-nom pn.Fsg that-pn1sg not.past read.juss.1sg the-assignment-acc
'The truth is that I did not read the assignment.'

The pronoun of separation is required in order to make it clear that the report constituent is not an adjectival or appositive modifier (17a), and that the whole string has clausal structure (17b):

- (17) a. ʔaḥmad-un iṭ-ṭawīl-u
Ahmad.Msg-nom the-tall.Msg-nom
'Ahmad the tall, tall Ahmad'
- b. ʔaḥmad-un huwwa iṭ-ṭawīl-u
Ahmad pn.3Msg the-tall.Msg-nom
'Ahmad is the tall one.'

Jelinek (1982), Eid (1983, 1991), Awad (1987), and Shlonsky (1997) analyze the copular pronoun as an auxiliary, in the same category as verbs like **kāna**, 'to be', and, in some dialects, the negation-> morpheme **miš** (Eid 1991, 1993). For example, Eid (1983, 1991, 1993) and Awwad (1987) note that copular pronouns can host the **ma...-š** negation circumfix, which is assumed to attach only to verbs or auxiliaries, suggesting that the pronoun itself is an auxiliary. A copular

pronoun hosting negation - a 'pronoun of negation' - also licenses pro-drop, a property shared with verbal stems but lacking for the simplex negation **miš**:

(18) Egyptian Arabic (Eid 1991:51):

- a. (ana) ma-nī-š sākna hina.
I.1sg not-pn1sg-neg living.Fsg here
'I am not living here.'
- b. *(ana) miš sākna hina.
I.1sg not living.Fsg here
"Same."

Likewise, Eid (1991) shows that the copular pronoun can be used to contrast an auxiliary:

- (19) ʿali ma-kan-š il-mudarris, ʿali huwwa il-mudarris.
Ali.Msg not-be.perf.3Msg-neg the-teacher Ali.Msg pn.3Msg the-teacher
'Ali WASN'T the teacher, Ali IS the teacher.'
(Egyptian Arabic: Eid 1991:49)

The two clauses (19) are contrasted in terms of tense. The first clause is in the past tense, and the truth of this is being negated and corrected by assertion of the present tense in the second conjunct. Therefore, what is being contrasted is the information expressed by the tense-nodes in the clauses, and therefore by the auxiliary element. Because the copular pronoun is providing this contrast, it appears to be in the auxiliary position.

4. Arabic as a Topic-Prominent Language

Recently, Doron (1997), Doron & Heycock (1999), Heycock & Doron (2003) and Alexopoulou, et al (2004) have argued that initial NPs in non-island compliant dependencies are in fact a kind of subject called *broad subjects*. The first argument for this is that a report constituent can consist of a simplex predicate coordinated with a complete clause:

- (20) sayyārat-i, [lawn-u-ha zāhiyy-un] wa-[maftūḥat-un min il-aʿla].
car.Fsg-pn1sg color.Msg-nom-pn3Fsg bright.Msg and-open.Fsg-nom-nom from the-above

'My car, it's color is bright and [it is] a convertible.'

'My car is brightly colored and a convertible.'

(Doron & Heycock 1999:73)

According to the *coordinate structure constraint* (Ross 1967), a constituent which is associated with a particular grammatical function in one conjunct must be associated with the same grammatical function in the other. The second conjunct in (20) is an incomplete predicate and the initial NP must construed as its subject:

(21) a. sayyārat-i maftūḥat-un min il-a^ʕla.
car.Fsg-pn1sg open.Fsg-nom from the-above
'My car is open from above,' 'My car is a convertible.'

b. *maftūḥat-un min il-a^ʕla.

Accordingly, the coordinate structure constraint requires that the initial NP be a subject in the first conjunct of (20) as well.

Another generalization that Doron & Heycock cite is that initial NPs can be non-referring while topics are assumed to be referential. For example, the initial NP in (22) is a negative polarity item, a non-referring expression:

(22) ʔayy-u muḫrij-in ʔajnabiyy-in la nu^ʔriḏu af^ʔlām-a-hu mindūni tarjamat-in.
any-nom director.Msg-gen foreign.Msg-gen not show.imperf.1pl.ind films-acc-pn3Msg without translation-gen
'Any foreign director, we don't show his films without subtitles.'

'We don't show any foreign director's films without subtitles.'

(Doron & Heycock 1999:84)

Doron & Heycock also argue that broad subject can be used within embedded contexts, a property of subjects and not topics:

(23) ʔaḏunn-u d-dār-a lawn-u-ha zāhiy-un.
consider.imperf.1sg.ind the-house.Fsg color.Msg-pn3Fsg bright.Msg
'I consider the house to be brightly colored.'

A last generalization that Doron & Heycock (1999) and Alexopoulou, et al (2004) cite is

that the initial NP is not associated with a particular discourse function such as topic or focus.

Instead, the initial NP can fill either of these functions, a point which Bakir (1980:129-130) also makes about initial NPs filling the subject function:

(24) (Lebanese Arabic: Alexopoulou, et al 2004:337)

- a. mīn ša^ʕar-a ṭawīl?
who hair.Msg-pn3Fsg long.Msg
'Whose hair is long?'
- b. Rana ša^ʕar-a ṭawīl.
Rana.Fsg hair-pn3Fsg long
'Rana's hair is long.'

Doron & Heycock (1999), Alexopoulou, et al (2001) and Heycock & Doron (2003) conclude that Arabic is a *discourse configurational* language, meaning that it uses the subject function to encode discourse relations in addition to thematic relations (see also Brustad 2000: Ch. 10).

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