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 mubtadiʾ (or initial NP), of which the remaining sub-constituent of the clause, called the χabar (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 ʾismaniyya) is the Arabic term for clauses in which a nominal expression (Arabic mubtadiʾ, 'that which is begun with, inchoative') is followed by another constituent (Arabic χabar, 'report, announcement') which is predicated of or comments on the first. Mubtadiʾ and χabar 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. ʾal-awlādu laʿibu kurat-a l-qadam.
   *The boys played football.'

   the-boys.Mpl-nom play.perf.3Mpl ball-acc the-foot

 b. ʾal-banāt-u yadrusna l-qawāʿid-a
   *The girls study grammar.*

   the-girls.Fsg-nom study.imperf.3Fpl.indic the-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-
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 rābit-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 rābit 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. jā’at il-banāt-u.  
    *ji’na l-banāt-u.  
    come.perf.3Fsg the-girls.Fpl-nom  
    "The girls came."
    come.perf.3Fpl the-girls.Fpl-nom  
    
(4)  a. ’al-banāt-u ji’na. 
    the-girls.Fpl-nom come.perf.3Fpl  
    "(As for) the girls, they came."
b. * ʾal-banāt-u jiʾna.
   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. ʾaṭ-ṭullābu, mata ḏahabu ʾila l-iʾrāq?
   the-students.Mpl-nom when go.perf.3Mpl to the-Iraq
   'The students, when did they go to Iraq?'
   (Bakir 1980:128)

b. *mata ʾaṭ-ṭullābu ḏahabu ʾila l-iʾrāq?

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 an non-subject initial NP and its rābiṭ.

For example, in (4), ʾal-ʾijtimāʾ, 'the meeting', is construed as the subject of the embedded verb ḥasala, 'took place.' In (6a) it is an initial subject taking the clause headed by ḥasala 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 tatasāʾalu, 'wonders':
(6) qālat zaynab-u ʾanna-ha tatasū’alu...

\[ \text{say.perf.3Fsg Zainab.Fsg-nom that-pn3Fsg wonder.imperf.3Fsg.ind} \]

ʾZainab said that she wonders..

a. \[ \text{[ man ʾidda’a ʾanna ʾal-ʾijtimāʿ-ā ṣasala fi baḡdād-a ]}. \]

\[ \text{who claim.perf.3Msg that the-meeting.Msg-acc happen.perf.3Msg in Baghdad-gen} \]

... who claimed that the meeting took place in Baghdad.'

b. \[ \text{[ man ʾiddaʿa ʾanna fi baḡdād-a ṣasala ʾal-ʾijtimāʿ-ā ]}. \]

\[ \text{who claim.perf.3Msg that in Baghdad-gen happen.perf.3Msg the-meeting.Msg-acc} \]

(7a-b) are variations on (6a-b) with left-dislocation of ʾal-ʾijtimāʿ. (7a) is acceptable while (7b) is not. The dependency in (7a) between ʾal-ʾijtimāʿ-u and the rābiṭ-pronoun crosses the wh-island headed by tatasū’alu. In contrast, the unacceptable (7b) associates ʾal-ʾijtimāʿ-u with the post-verbal subject positio of ṣasala, the unacceptability apparently being due to the dependency crossing the wh-island boundary:

(7) ʾal-ʾijtimāʿ-u₁ qālat Zaynab-u ʾanna-ha tatasū’alu

\[ \text{the-meeting.Msg-nom say.perf.3Fsg Zainab.Fsg-nom that-pn3Fsg wonder.imperf.3Fsg.ind} \]

a. \[ \text{[ man ʾidda’a ʾanna-hu₁ ṣasala fi baḡdād-a ]}. \]

\[ \text{who claim.perf.3Msg that-pn3Msg happen.perf.3Msg in Baghdad-gen} \]

b. *[\[ man ʾidda’a ʾanna fi baḡdād-a ṣasala }₁ \].

\[ \text{who claim.perf.3Msg that in Baghdad-gen happen.perf.3Msg} \]

'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 rābit-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.  ʿaš-šārīʿ-u, qābaltu sālim-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 ʿištaraytu kitāb-a-ha l-ams-a  
\textit{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.  
\textit{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.  
\textit{Hind.Fsg-nom Salim.Msg-nom beat.imperf.3Fsg-pn3Msg}  
'Hind, Salim, she beats him.' (Bakir 1980:165)

b.  muḥammad-un, ʾas-sayyārat-u, ʾurṭ-u-hu, bāʾa-ha la-ha.  
\textit{Muḥammad.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 ʿrābiṭ-pronoun is then established by a coindexing rule. This is motivated by the insensitivity of the the relationship between the initial NP and the ʿrābiṭ to syntactic island constraints (Ross 1967), such as the complex-NP constraint (11a) or the wh-island constraint (11b):

(11) a.  zayd-un, ʾaḏunnu r-rajul-a [ llaḏi ʾintaqada-hu ʾintaḥara ].  
\textit{Zaid.Msg-nom believe.imperf.1sg.ind the-man(Msg-nom rel.Msg}  
\textit{criticize.perf.3Msg-pn3Msg commit:suicide.perf.3Msg}  
'(As for) Zaid, I believe that the man who criticized him committed suicide.'

(Mohamm ad 2000:68)

b. ʾal-walad-u tasāʾaltu [ man raʾā-hu ].  
\textit{the-boy.Msg-nom wonder.perf.1sg who see.perf.3Msg-pn3Msg}  
'(As for) the boy, I wondered who saw him.'

(Mohamm ad 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 rābat-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 rābat-pronoun. To illustrate, in (12) the possessive pronoun inside the initial NP talmīz-a, 'her student', is interpreted as bound by the quantificational NP koll m’sallme, 'every teacher':

(12) talmīz-a š-šītān bta’rfo ṣənno koll m’sallme ṣaṣaṣat-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.'


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 rābat-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-šītān fallayto ṣablma koll m’sallme tšaṣaṣ-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. ˁīsa ṭawīlu ș-șabr.
   *Isa.Msg long.Msg-nom the-patience*
   'Isa is very patient.'

b. χalil-un nā'im-un fī l-bayt-i.
   *Khalil.Msg-nom sleep.act:part.Msg-nom in the-house-gen*
   'Khalil is sleeping in the house.'

c. jareš fī šamāl-i ġarb-i l-ˀurdan.
   *Jaresh in north-gen west-gen the-Jordan*
   'Jaresh is in the north-west of Jordan.'

d. da yzi l-ˀamīr kātibat-un ˀirāqiyyat-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 fī š-șitāˀ-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 ādamir il-faṣl), also referred to as a 'copular pronoun':

    Marwan.Msg-nom pn.3Msg the-tall.Msg-nom
    'Marwan is the tall one.'

b. ʔal-ḥaqiqat-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
    Aḥmad.Msg-nom the-tall.Msg-nom
    'Ahmad the tall, tall Ahmad'

b. ʔaḥmad-un huwwa iṭ-ṭawīl-u
    Aḥmad 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-ni-š sākna hina.  
      1.1sg not-pn1sg-neg living.Fsg here  
      'I am not living here.'

   b. *( ana ) miš sākna hina.  
      1.1sg not living.Fsg here  
      "Same."

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

(19) ˁali ma-kan-š il-mudarris, ˁali 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 at (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) sayyārāt-i, [ lawn-u-ha zāhiyy-un ] wa-[ maftūḥat-un min il-ˁla ].  
'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-aṭla.  
      *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-aṭla.

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)  
   ˁayy-u muṣrīj-in ˁajnabiyy-in la nuʔriḍu afalām-a-hu mindūni tarjamāt-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)  
   ˁadunn-u d-dār-a lawn-u-ha zāḥiy-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:

   a. mīn ša’ar-a ṭawīl?
      *Whose hair is long?*
   b. Rana ša’ar-a ṭawīl.
      *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).

References:


Aoun, Joseph and Benmamoun, Elabbas. 1998. 'Minimality, reconstruction, and PF movement'. *Linguistic Inquiry* 29.59-59


Eid, Mushira. 1983. 'The copula function of pronouns'. Lingua 59.197-207.


Nominal Relative Clause: In each of the sentences below, the relative pronoun is followed by a nominal sentence (i.e. subject/topic Ù... ÙO*UO*ÚO+ÚO*) + predicate O*UO+ÚO*+). A semi-sentence / clause is called ÙO*UO*ÚO+ÚO*+ in Arabic. It constitutes a preposition or adverb of place followed by a noun, such as ÙO*UO*ÚO+ÚO*+ O*UO+ÚO*+ ÙO* in the houseâ€™ and ÙO*UO*ÚO+ÚO*+ ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+ ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+ ÙO*+ ÙO*+ ÙO+ in the house under the tableâ€™. If it follows the relative pronoun (to form a relative clause), it does not include a referent pronoun, as in these examples: (Ø£) O*O*ÚO*ÚO+ÚO*+ O*ÚO+ÚO*+ ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+ ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+ ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+. â€œI know who is in the room.â€œ V-ing clause: Typing all these reports costs a lot of money Nominal Sentences: Arabic nominal sentence differs from the English one in the suffix which is added to the verb which is in agreement with respect to number, gender and person: ÙO*O*ÚO*ÚO+ÚO*+ ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+ ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+ ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+. ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+ ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+ ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+. ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+ ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+. ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+ ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+. ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+ ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+. ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+. ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+. ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+. ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+. ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+. ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+. ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+. ÙO*ÚO+ÚO*+. Verbal Sentences: A sentence that begins with a verb; Arabic uses this sentence abundantly while English does not have this type of sentences.