The Pronominal Copula in Arabic

In Arabic sentences with non-verbal predicates, the copula can sometimes take the form of third person strong pronouns (PRON); otherwise, it is verbal (KN) (or phonetically null ($\varnothing$)). In this talk, I examine the typology of copular constructions in Arabic. Evidence from Lebanese Arabic is brought to bear on two important issues: the contributions of the different copular elements to the syntax of those constructions and whether the different copular elements correlate with structural differences.

Within Semitic languages, two lines of argument have been put forward. Building on Doron (1986), Shlonsky (1997) argues for two different structures underlying copular sentences in Modern Hebrew (MH): A 'small clause analysis' underlies sentences with a null copula, whereas copular sentences involving PRON project a full IP structure. Evidence for the two-structure analysis comes from negative contexts: Copular clauses involving a null copula can be embedded under the negative *'eyn*; that is not the case with copular sentences involving PRON. Under the assumption that MH makes available one subject position below negation, this contrast shows that copular sentences involving PRON require more structure than those involving a null copula, and that the subject in the former must be higher than the one in the latter.

On the other hand, in a study of agreement in Arabic, Ouhalla (2013) unifies copular sentences with sentences involving lexical verbs. The main objective of this study is to show that all manifestations of agreement in Arabic can be unified under an AGREE approach to the phenomenon (Chomsky 2000). The assumption made about PRON is that it is the manifestation of the agreement features of T (Eid 1983, 1991), when T corresponds to the present tense. Otherwise, T is realized as the verbal copula, KN. According to Ouhalla (2013), copular sentences in Arabic correspond to one underlying structure, and the observed differences between PRON and KN (or even $\varnothing$) (e.g. the case features of the non-verbal predicate) result from the differences in the feature makeup of the copular elements themselves.

Using data from Lebanese Arabic (LA), I revisit important observations made about the distribution of the different copular elements in Eid (1991), and I show that PRON and KN fulfill different syntactic roles in the copular sentences in which they occur. I then argue for two distinct structures underlying copular sentences in Arabic, which differ in whether FP is projected (1).

(1) [$_{TP}$ T[AGR] ([$_{FP}$ F) [$_{PredP}$ Subject [$_{Pred'}$ Predicate]]]]

F, which is generally phonetically null, bears the features: third person, number, and gender. FP is projected to allow full DPs to function as predicates. When present, PRON is projected in F. Sentences involving AdjP, PP, or NP predicates do not project FP. Finally, KN, when present, realizes T[AGR]. As a result, PRON and KN differ, not only in the position they occupy in the structure, but also in their feature makeup.

In this talk, I will demonstrate how the different structures schematically represented in (1) account for the typology of copular sentences in LA. I will also bring different pieces of evidence to bear on this analysis. I start by highlighting the correlation between the projection of FP and full DPs as predicate nominals in LA. I then show that the patterns of distribution of KN vs. PRON undermine the attempts at establishing a complementarity between the two elements. The strongest evidence comes from sentences where both KN and PRON can be present (2).

(2) a. yimkin   ma   ykuun   ħada   huwwe   l-miškle
     possible   neg.   is.3ms   someone   PRON   the-problem
     'It is possible that no one is the problem.'

   b. yimkin   ma   ħada   ykuun   huwwe   l-miškle
     possible   neg.someone   is.3ms   he   the-problem
     'It is possible that no one is the problem.'

The sentences in (2) provide direct evidence that PRON and KN are not mutually exclusive and that they occupy different positions in the structure of copular sentences. Finally, I discuss the pronominal nature of F, and establish an analogy between PRON and the third person pronoun that introduces epithet phrases in LA (3) (Aoun and Choueiri 2000).

(3) Sami, ha-l-mažduub,   harab
   S.   3-the-idiot   ran-away.3ms
   'Sami, this idiot, ran away.'

The conclusion is that, while KN realizes features of verbal morphology in T, PRON is a linker (Philip 2013), namely a syntactically independent functional head that overtly realizes an existing semantic relation, in this case a thematic relation between a subject and a full DP predicate.

The analysis combines insights from Shlonsky (1997)/Doron (1986) as well as Eid (1991) and Ouhalla (2013), but goes beyond them to explain the complex distribution of the copula elements in Arabic. I will end the talk by examining the consequences of the analysis for cross-Arabic variation in the distribution of PRON.

Subfield: Syntax