

SPECIFICITY IN ARABIC

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Summary: Specificity as it appears in Arabic describes the individuation of indefinite nouns. It plays a role in several aspects of Arabic grammar, including restrictions on indefinite noun phrases in nominal clauses, semantic effects of restrictive modification, and patterns of agreement marking.

1. Introduction

Specificity is a term used in traditional Arabic grammar as well as in contemporary linguistics. As applied to Arabic, it describes *identifiability* or *individuation* of indefinite *noun phrases*-> which are used to introduce new discourse topics or to refer to generic referents (Khan 1988; Lumsden 1988; Lambrecht 1994; Brustad 2000). Phenomena in Modern Standard Arabic and in the Arabic dialects that involve specificity include:

- (1) a. Restrictions on indefinite noun phrases in the **mubtadi**^c (or *initial NP*) position in *nominal clauses*->;
- b. The semantic effects of *noun phrase*-> modification;
- c. *Agreement*-> marking in existential or presentational sentences (Arabic **jumul ḍarfiyya**, 'locative sentences').

2. Specificity in Nominal Clauses

It has often been claimed that initial NPs in Arabic *nominal clauses*-> must be definite (Wright 1898:261; Cantarino 1975:31; Bakir 1980:62-63; Brustad 2000:332; Holes 2004:252),

unless they have are 'specified' (Arabic **tayyīs**, 'specification') under the following circumstances

(Wright 1898:260-264; Cantarino 1975:31; Mohammad 2000:111-141):

- (2) a. They have generic or abstract reference;
- b. They are modified by an adjective or its equivalent;
- c. They are pronounced with 'emphatic' intonation;
- d. They are conjoined with other definite or specific nouns.

This description is not completely accurate because in some circumstances 'unspecified' nouns are used as initial NPs:

(3) Standard Arabic (Kahn 1988:33)

- a. **'asad-un** marrat-an ištadda 'alay-hi ḥarr-u l-šams.
lion.3MS-nom time.FS-acc weigh.perf.3MS upon-cl3MS heat.MS-nom the-sun
'A [certain] lion, once the heat of the sun weighed upon him.'
- b. **'insān-un** kāna la-hu ṣanam-un.
man.MS-nom be.perf.3MS to-cl.3MS idol.MS-nom
'A [certain] man, he had an idol...'

(4) Bir Zeit Palestinian Arabic

- a. **ḥaṭṭāb** b-irūḥ čill yōm 'a-l-hiš b-iğīb-l-e ḥimil ḥaṭab
wood-cutter.MS indic-go.imperf.3MS every day to-the-forest indic-
bring.imperf.3MS-to-cl3MS load wood
'A [certain] woodcutter, he would go every day to the forest and get himself a load of wood'
(Schmidt & Kahle 1930:4)
- b. **χūri** ġāy min nāblis bāt fi ramallā.
priest.MS come.act.part.MS from Nablus overnight.perf.3MS in Ramallah
'A [certain] priest coming from Nablus spent the night in Ramallah'
(Schmidt & Kahle 1930:124)

Examples like (3) and (4) appear at the beginnings of narratives where they introduce discourse topics (Khan 1988). Accordingly, they are specific even though they do lack any of the properties in (2a-d).

3. Specificity and Noun Modification

Several Arabic dialects allow modification of indefinite nouns with 'definite' relative clauses, an apparent exception to the rule that indefinite nouns can be modified only by 'indefinite' modifiers. These dialects include Egyptian (Mitchell 1956), Palestinian (Schmidt & Kahle 1918, 1930; Blau 1960; Belyayeva 1996), Moroccan (Harrell 1962), Syrian (Cowell 1964), and various Gulf dialects (Holes 1990). For example, in Syrian Arabic (5a) and in the Bir Zeit Palestinian Arabic (5b) indefinite nouns can be modified by 'definite' relative clauses headed by the particles **yalli** or **illi**, 'which, that': :

- (5) a. fi wāḥde **yalli** b-ətzakkar-a fi-ha 'əsm-a
expl one.FS rel indic-think.imperf.1S-cl3FS in-cl3FS name-cl3FS
'There's one I remember who has her name in it'
(Cowell 1964:499)
- b. bāki hāna walad **illi** ibn 'arūs katal abū.
be.actpart.MS here child rel son groom kill.perf.3MS father-cl3MS
'There was a child here who's father Ibn Arus had killed.'
(Schmidt & Kahle 1930:34)

Brustad (2000:91-99) suggests that in examples like these 'definite' relative clauses indicate that the modified nouns are 'highly individuated,' meaning that the speaker has a particular individual or individuals in mind when using the noun.

Some dialects use a particular affix or morpheme to express specificity. Ingam (1994) notes that the in Najdi Bedouin dialects of Saudi Arabia, vestigial **tanwīn**-> marking marks indefinite NPs as specific. For example, the indefinite noun **bēt** means 'house,' while with the **-in** suffix it means 'a particular house' (Ingam 1994:47). Comparable uses of the particle **šī** 'some' in Moroccan and Syrian Arabic is discussed by Brustad (2000:26-27).

4. Specificity and Agreement Marking

In several dialects of Arabic, existential sentences alternate between 'full' agreement marking on the verb and 'reduced' or 'neutralized' agreement marking (Cowell 1964; Belnap 1991; Hoyt 2000, 2002). In Rural Palestinian Arabic, speakers express subtle preferences for full or neutralized agreement, depending on the form of the post-verbal subject noun phrase. With 'richly' modified subjects speakers express a slight preference (indicated with '☞') for full agreement:

- (6) a. **bāki** / ☞ **bākye** hanāk ḥayye bidd-ha tōčil frāx iṭ-ṭēr.
be.actpart.Msg be.actpart.Fsg there snake.Fsg want-pn3Fsg eat.imperf.3Fsg
chicks the-bird
"There was a snake there [that] wanted to eat the bird's eggs." (Hoyt 2002)

If the subject is modified by a numerical quantifier, there is a slight preference for neutralized agreement:

- (7) b. **bākyīn** / ☞ **bāki** fī dār abū-ha sabi^c ṭaman harraṭīn.
be.actpart.Mpl be.actpart.Msg in house father-pn3Fsg seven eight plowmen
"In her father's household were seven or eight plowmen." (Hoyt 2002)

Rural Palestinian Arabic has an 'indefinite' use of the demonstrative **hal-**, 'this' (Blau 1960:20)

which is directly parallel to the 'indefinite' use of **this** in vernacular English (Prince 1981). If the subject is modified with indefinite **hal-**, there is a slight preference for neutralized agreement:

- (8) a. **čānat** / ☞ **čān** tiḥt sēr-e haṭ-ṭabanje mnazzale bi-l-fiḍḍe.
be.perf.3Msg be.perf.3Fsg under belt-pn3Msg this-pistol.Fsg inlaid.Fsg with-the-
silver
"Under his belt was a pistol inlaid with silver." (Hoyt 2002:)

Restrictive modification increases the identifiability of a nominal referent and correspondingly the preference for full agreement, modification of a noun with a numerical quantifier reduces its identifiability by focusing on the cardinality of the set it denotes, and so reduces the preference

for full agreement (Brustad 2000:Ch.1). However, use of the indefinite **hal-** also increases the identifiability of the noun it modifies, as it introduces new discourse referents (Blau 1960:20), and should trigger a preference for full agreement. It may be that Rural Palestinian Arabic uses both full agreement marking and indefinite **hal-** for expressing specificity in presentational sentences, but that neutralized agreement is necessary for **hal-** to receive its indefinite interpretation.

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