

Negative Polarity in Arabic

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Summary: Negative polarity is a property of sentences modified with negative or downward monotonic operators. Negative polarity items are expressions the interpretations of which are affected by negative polarity, or which require the presence of a negative polarity environment for felicitous use. Both Modern Standard Arabic and the Arabic dialects include a range of negative polarity items, including nominal, adverbial, and idiomatic NPIs. Several varieties of Arabic also show negative concord, the co-occurrence of multiple negative expressions in which only one negation is understood.

1. Introduction

In terms of classical logic, the *polarity* of a sentence describes whether it asserts a truth or a falsehood. Accordingly, sentences have either negative polarity in the case of a negated meaning, and positive polarity in the case of affirmative meaning. Many linguistic expressions are *sensitive* to negative polarity: their interpretation is affected by or requires the presence of a negative-polarity expression (referred to as the *licensor*). Such expressions are referred to as *negative polarity items* (NPIs), and are usually interpreted as expressing the lack of even the minimum quantity or degree of the meaning of the expressions they modify (c.f. Fauconnier 1975; Kadmon and Landman 1993; Krifka 1995; Lahiri 1997; Giannikadou 1998).

The study of negative polarity has been a major theme in modern linguistics

since Jespersen (1917). Important or influential studies include Klima (1964), Baker (1970), Ladusaw (1979), Linebarger (1987), Horn (1989), Progovac (1993), Fauconnier (1975), Kadmon and Landman (1993), Vallduví (1994), Krifka (1995), Lahiri (1997), van der Wouden (1997), Zwarts (1997), Giannikadou (1998), and Szabolsci (2004).

There has been as yet little investigation into negative polarity in Arabic. Work that has been done includes Woidich (1968), Ouhalla (1993, 1997b, 2002), Mohamad and Ouhalla (1995) and Benmamoun's (1995, 1997).

This article provides a brief overview of NPIs in both MSA and the Arabic dialects in which the relevant phenomena are documented. Section 2 provides an overview of negative polarity as a general topic. Section 3 discusses negative polarity items in both Standard Arabic and the dialects. Section 4 discusses *negative concord*.

2. Negative Polarity

Traditionally, *negative polarity* has been used to describe sentences containing a negation morpheme. However, since Fauconnier (1975) and Ladusaw (1980), it has been recognized that many NPIs are licensed in environments that lack a negation morpheme. Accordingly, the property that licenses NPIs has been characterized as *downward monotonicity* (Fauconnier 1975; Ladusaw 1980, von Stechow 1999), *pragmatic strengthening* (Kadmon and Landman 1993, Krifka 1995, Lahiri 1997), or as *non-veridicality* (Giannikadou 1998, 1999, 2000).

3. Negative Polarity Items in Arabic

There has been little theoretical work on negative polarity items in Arabic, notable

exceptions being Ouhalla (1993, 1997b, 2002) and Benmamoun (1995, 1997) which are discussed in Section 4. Given this lack, the remainder of this section is a brief survey of expression in different varieties of Arabic that appear to be NPIs.

3.1 Nominal NPIs

The most common nominal NPIs are Standard Arabic *ʔaḥad* ‘one, anyone’ and *šeyyʔ* ‘thing, anything’ (1a-b) and their cognates in the dialects (1c-d). These resemble English *any*-nouns in having both negative and non-negative interpretations.

- (1) a. *bi-kull-i taʔkīd lam yataraddad ʔaḥad min-na.*
with-all-Gen certainty not.past hesitate.3ms one.ms from-cl1p
‘With all certainty, not one of us hesitated.’ (MSA: www)
- b. *ʔal-maḥākimu d-dawliyyatu lam tafʔal shayʔ-an ḥiyāl dārfūr.*
the-courts.fp the-national.fs not.past do.3fs thing-Acc regarding Darfur
‘The national courts haven’t done anything regarding Darfur’. (MSA: www)
- c. *mā-šuft-iš iši bass ʔala kull ḥāl ʔawar haifa ḥalwāt ktīr.*
not-saw.1s-neg thin but on every case pictures Haifa beautiful.fp much
‘I didn’t see anything but, in any case, the pictures of Haifa are very nice.’ (Palestinian Arabic: www)
- d. *ma-baḡēt ḥadd yrūḥ maʔa-k*
not-wanted.1s one go.3ms with-cl.2s
‘I didn’t want anyone to go with you.’
(Moroccan Arabic: www)

A common NPI determiner is *ʔaiy* ‘which, any’, used both in Standard Arabic (2a) as well as in dialect (2b) to construct strongly contrastive NPIs:

- (2) a. *lam yafham ʔaiy-u ʔaḥad-in ḡayr-i ʔabadan ʔaiy-a mawqaf-in min mawāfiq-a-ki.*

not.past understand.3ms any-Nom one.ms-Gen other-than-cl.1s ever any-
Acc opinion-Gen from opinions-cl.3fs

‘There isn’t anyone other than me who ever understood any one of your
opinions.’ (MSA: www)

b. *bass bi-ṣarāḥa mā-fī ʔaiy ḥada b-iqdar yiḥall maḥall zīdān.*

but with-honesty not-exist any one be-able.3ms occupy.3ms place Zidan

‘...but honestly, there isn’t any person who can take Zidan’s
place.’ (Levantine Arabic: www)

According to Erwin (1969), in Iraqi Arabic the quantifier *kullši* ‘everything’ (3a) has a
negative polarity interpretation in negative sentences (3b):

(3) *la waḥḥa, kullši ma-ṣind-i*

no by-God anything not-at-cl.1s

‘I don’t have anything’ (Erwin 1969: p.88)

3.2 Adverbial NPIs

NPI adverbs in MSA include, in addition to MSA *ʔabadan* ‘ever’ discussed above
and *muṭlaqan* ‘at all, ever’ below, *qaṭṭu* ‘(not) at all’, and *ʔal-batta* ‘at all’ (Bedawi, et. al.
2004:476-477):

(4) a. *samiʕu wa-lam yubṣiru qaṭṭu.*

hear.perf.3mp and-not.past see.perf.3mp at-all

‘They have heard but they have not seen at all.’ (MSA; Bedawi, et. al.
2004:476)

b. *la faḍl-a li-ya l-batta*

not credit-acc to-cl1s at-all

‘There is no credit to me at all.’ (MSA; Bedawi, et. al. 2004:477)

In the dialects, common adverbial NPIs include *bi-l-marra* ‘once, ever’ and cognates of
ʕumr- ‘ever’. Like *ʔaḥad* and *šeiʔ*, *bi-l-marra* is ambiguous between an NPI and non-

negative interpretations:

- (5) a. *ʔanta lam tuwḏiḥ šeyʔan bi-l-marra*
you.ms not.past clarify.2ms thing-acc in-the-once
'You didn't every clarify anything.' (MSA: www)
- b. *ʔasaf yā ʔaxiy, kalām-ak ġayr ṣaḥīḥ bi-l-marra.*
sorry oh brother words-cl.2ms not true in-the-once
'Sorry Brother, your talk isn't ever true.' (Egyptian: www)

The adverb *ʔumr-* 'ever' (which has cognates in most dialects) has only negative polarity interpretations and must co-occur with a licenser:

- (6) a. *ʔana ʔumr-i ma-šuft wāḥad miθl-u.*
I ever-my not-saw.1s one like-him
'I have never seen anyone like him.' (Levantine: www)
- b. *bba ʔammar-u ma-ka-šreb.*
father-my every-cl.3ms not-cont-drink.3ms
'My father, he never drinks.' (Moroccan: Harrel and Sobelman 1964)

3.3 NPI Auxiliaries

In many dialects certain motion verbs are used as aspectual auxiliaries or sentential connectives (Schmidt and Kahle 1918, Blau 1960, Hussein 1990, Mitchell and al-Hassan 1994, Khalaily 1997). Examples include *qām* 'rise, stand' and cognates of *ʔād*, *ʔāwad*, or *rajaʔ* 'return'. As auxiliaries, they express inchoative or iterative aspect, or, in the case of *qām*, a meaning very similar to that of MSA *fa-* 'then, so':

- (7) *qām raiaʔ nām*
stood.3ms returned.3ms slept.3ms

“Then he went to sleep again.” (Levantine: *www*)

As auxiliaries, they appear to have negative polarity interpretations. For example,

negating *qām* results in a meaning translatable as English *ever*:

- (8) *ma-qām-iš yixallī-hin yitlaʿin*
not-stood.3ms-neg allowed.3ms-them go-out
“He didn’t ever let them venture out.”
(Bir Zeit Palestinian: Schmidt and Kahle 1918: §46.1)

Similarly, negating *ʿād* or *ʿāwad* yields an interpretation translatable as English

anymore:

- (9) *ma-ʿadt-š tiʿrif iši*
not-returned.2ms know.2ms thing
“You don’t know anything anymore.” (Levantine: *WWW*)

In Moroccan Arabic, auxiliaries like *ʿad* ‘anymore’ and *gaʿ* ‘at all’ seem to have only the negative polarity interpretation:

- (10) a. *ʿad ma-yiji.*
anymore not-come.3ms
‘He doesn’t come anymore’
b. *gaʿ ma-ta-txruz berra*
at.all not-cont-go.out.3fs outside
‘She doesn’t go outside at all.’

3.4 NPI idioms

Another category of NPI found in Arabic are idioms that are felicitous only in the presence of an NPI licenser. For example Stowasser and Ani (1964) give examples in Syrian Arabic such as *tʿallaq ʿala rijl-o* ‘hang from someone’s shoe’ (c.f., English *couldn’t*

care less), *rafa*^ʕ *l-o qašše* ‘life a match for someone’:

- (11) a. *mā-bit*^ʕ *allaq* ^ʕ *ala rijl-i šū bya*^ʕ *taqed huwwē*
not-hang.3ms upon foot-my what thinks.3ms he
“What he says doesn’t hang from my shoe.” (p.35)
- b. *walla mā-barfa*^ʕ *l-o qašše*
by-God not-lift.1s-to-cl.3ms match
“I won’t lift a match for him” (p.139)

4. Negative Concord

Negative concord describes sentences in which one or more *n-words* (word that can express negation in a fragment answer) co-occur with one or more other *negative expressions* (morphemes that express sentential negation) in a negative sentence in which only one of them contributes negative meaning (Giannikadou 2003, Watanabe 2004). Negative concord is the subject of an extensive literature. Influential studies include Jespersen (1917), Labov (1972), Laka (1990), Ladusaw (1992), Progovac (1993b), Vallduví (1994), van der Wouden (1994), Haegeman & Zanuttini (1996), Deprez (2000), Herburger (2001), Giannikadou (2003), and Watanabe (2004).

To illustrate, the MSA adverb *muṭlaqan* ‘completely, at all’ can express negation in a fragment answer:

- (12) Q: *hāl haḡa l-maraḡu xaṭīrun?*
this.ms the-disease.ms dangerousMS
‘Is this disease dangerous?’
- A: *la, muṭlaqan.*
no not.at.all

‘No, not at all.’ (MSA: *www*)

Elsewhere *muṭlaqan* appears along with a negation morpheme and does not itself express negation, indicating that it undergoes negative concord:

- (13) *il-ṣiyn lan tasmuḥa muṭlaqan bi-ʾistaqlāli tāywān.*
the-China not.fut tolerate.3fs not.at.all with-independence Taiwan
‘China will not tolerate at all Taiwan’s independence.’ (MSA: *www*)

Based on data in published grammars, theoretical work, text corpora (print, electronic, and broadcast), and elicited from native speakers, negative concord also occurs in the Levantine dialects (Schmidt & Kahle 1918, 1930; Blau 1960; Cowell 1964), Egyptian (Woidich 1968), some Gulf dialects (Qafisheh 1977), north African dialects (Marçais 1977), and particularly in Moroccan. (Harrel 1962, 1965, Harrel and Sobelman 1966; Ouhalla 1993, 1997b, 2000; Benmamoun 1995, 1997).

A common n-word in the eastern dialects is the determiner *wala* ‘not (even) one, not a single’. Combined with a noun, it can be used to express negation:

- (14) Q: *šū qal-l-ak?* A: *wala iši.*
what said.3ms-to-cl.2ms not.even thing
‘What did he say to you?’ ‘Not a thing.’
(Palestinian Arabic: from the film *Paradise Now*)

However, when *wala* falls within the scope of sentential negation it fails to express negation:

- (15) *ma-bansa wala wāḥid min-nun. wala wāḥid!*
not-forget not.even one from-cl3P not.even one
‘I won’t forget a single one of them. Not a single one.’
(Syrian Arabic: from the television program *Spotlight*)

This shows *wala* undergoing negative concord.

For some Levantine speakers, the negation morpheme itself can undergo negative concord with a preceding n-word. In the following example the negation morpheme *mā-* follows *wala marra* ‘not once’ in a context that makes clear that only one negative meaning is expressed by the sentence:

(16) *wala marra mā-ʔinṭarad min il-ṣaff.*

not.even once not expelled.1s from the-class

“Not once have I been expelled from class.” (Palestinian Arabic: www)

The acceptability of such examples appears to be restricted to Palestinian, although the matter requires further study.

Other n-words include adverbs like *ʔabadan* ‘(n)ever, (not) at all’ and MSA *muṭlaqan* noted above. In Moroccan Arabic *ḥatta* ‘even’ (Harrel 1962, 1965; Harrel and Sobelman 1966; Benmamoun 1997) can be used to express negation in fragment answers, satisfying the definition of n-word:

“In English one would be more likely to say ‘Not a one!’ instead of ‘He didn’t take a single ticket!’ in answer to ‘How many tickets did he take?’

Similarly in Moroccan one may say simply *ḥatta waḥda* instead of a full sentence such as, for example, *ma-^candu ḥatta werqa* ‘He doesn’t have a single ticket.’” (Harrel 1965, p.235)

This indicates that Moroccan *ḥatta*-NPs undergo negative concord.

However, Moroccan *ḥatta*-NPs differ from *wala*-NPs in the eastern dialects in that

Moroccan *ḥatta*-NPs never express negation in a full clause, regardless of their position with respect to the verb. Instead they must be licensed by a negation morpheme in both pre-verbal and post-verbal positions:

- (17) a. *ḥatta ḥadd *(ma-) šaf-ni.*
 even one.ms not saw.3ms-me
 “Not even one person saw me.”
- b. **(ma-) šaf-ni ḥatta ḥadd*
 not saw.3ms-me even one.ms
 “Not even one person saw me.”

Published grammars of other Arabic dialects include data that closely resemble the examples of negative concord given there but do not provide the crucial examples of the expressions in question being used to express negation in fragment answers.

Therefore, further work remains to be done to see how wide-spread negative concord is in the Arabic dialects.

5. Summary

Both Standard Arabic and various Arabic dialects exhibit a range of negative-polarity sensitive expressions and phenomena, including nominal, adverbial and idiomatic NPIs, as well as negative concord. Much work remains to be done to both inventory the kinds of negative polarity items used in the dialects, and to provide descriptive and theoretical analyses of their properties.

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