Broad Subjects in Arabic

Mansour Qazan Alotaibi[1]

[1] Department of Arabic, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Mansour Qazan Alotaibi, Department of Arabic, College of Education, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, P. O. Box 176, Alkharj, 11942, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: mq.alotaibi@psau.edu.sa

Abstract

In contrast to the claim made in recent studies which proposes that the initial nominative NP in Arabic is not a left-dislocated topic but rather is a broad subject, this paper argues that Arabic has no Multiple Nominative Construction of the Japanese construction. The paper provides a number of arguments to support this position. It argues that the initial noun phrase is a left-dislocated topic, occupying A'-position.

Keywords: broad subjects, Arabic, left dislocation, multiple nominative construction, minimalist approach

1. Introduction

Doron and Heycock (1999), Heycock and Doron (2003), Alexopoulou, Doron and Heycock, 2004 (henceforth, ADH), and Doron and Heycock (2010) (henceforth, collectively, DH) argue that Arabic and Hebrew have a construction in which the initial nominative DPs are a broad subject (also referred to as multiple nominatives or Major Subjects), rather than a left-dislocated topic. They claim that they behave like a broad subject of Japanese type and they share the properties of occupying a specifier position of TP. An example is given in (1), where the coindexed elements are in bold:

1)   hind-un   yuqaabilu-ha   T-Tullaab-u

     Hind-NOM   meet.3M-her   the students

     'The students are meeting Hind.'

According to their analysis, the initial noun phrase in such sentences is not dislocated, but a syntactic subject.

As for Hebrew, this analysis is challenged in Landau (2009) who argues against broad subjects in Hebrew. He claims that Hebrew has no construction comparable to the Japanese multiple nominative constructions (MNC). He asserts that structures like (1) in Hebrew are uniquely analysable as left dislocation. The initial noun phrase is a left dislocated topic in A'-position as he presents several arguments in support his claim.

This paper argues, for Arabic on the basis of wide-ranging syntactic evidence, although Arabic has constructions with two initial nominative DPs, the behaviour of the outer nominative DPs is far different from the behaviour of the called 'broad subjects', the outer nominative DP in MSA is really a left-dislocated topic.

2. The Novel of Broad Subject

DH and ADH provide a novel argument to further distinguish between broad subject constructions and clitic left dislocation constructions. In their view, Broad Subjects are directly merged high up in the TP domain and are not a result of movement to that position. DH (1999) demonstrate that the outer nominative DP in Arabic (and Hebrew) is neither a left-dislocated topic nor focus phrase, but it is a subject which combines with a 'sentential predicate'. They argue that Arabic shares with Japanese the properties of permitting an extra clause-initial NP. They both have properties that are associated with a subject rather than left-dislocated topics.

The existence of multiple nominative subjects is uncontroversial in Japanese. In Japanese, a single clause has two or more nominative arguments. The following example illustrates this phenomenon (Note1):

2)   Zoo   ga   hana   ga   naga-i

     elephant   NOM   trunk   NOM   long-PRS

     'As for the elephant, its trunk is long.'

It is assumed that a certain constituent such as the one in (2) is referred as the 'Major Subject' (Large Subject in Shibatani 1999; Broad Subjects in Doron and Heycock 1999), because the leftmost nominative DP, *Zoo ga* (Elephant-NOM) is not the thematic subject of the verb, rather is an extra argument, marked in the nominative Case (Hideki, 2017). As claimed by Kuno (1973), Kuroda (1986), and Heycock (1993), initial nominative DPs (Broad Subjects) in Japanese behave like thematic subjects (Narrow Subjects). However, Broad Subjects differ from Narrow Subjects in two major respects. The first one is that a Broad Subject is not an argument of the predicate. The second difference is that Sentential Predicates have to satisfy an 'aboutness' condition. The implication of this condition is that the Sentential Predicate behaves like a Comment in terms of the aboutness requirement, respects the specificity requirement imposed on the phrase they are predicated (James, 2004, p. 292, and see references contained therein).

As for Arabic, DHs and ADH attested the multiple nominative constructions (MNC), a common construction in Japanese and claim that clause-initial NPs in Arabic (and Hebrew) have the properties associated with a subject and not with left-dislocated topics or topicalized phrases. They assert that they are really a 'Broad Subject'. A typical MNC in Arabic as in ADH (2004, p. 334):

3) al-bayt-u Ɂalwaan-u-hu zaahiyat-un

   the-house-NOM colours-NOM-its bright-NOM

   'The house has bright colours'

   Lit. 'The house, its colours are bright.'

The construction of Broad Subject is parallel to subject-predicate constructions in that broad subject is base-generated in an A-position associated with a pronominal clitic inside the sentence. Therefore, the construction of Broad Subject can violate island constraints (Note 2).

Here, according to DHs analysis the sequence *Ɂalwaan-u-hu zaahiyat-un* (colours-it bright) is a predicate. The broad subject *al-bayt-u* is directly merged as the outer specifier of TP, so it is not an argument of the verb, but rather it is the subject of the sentential predicate. The narrow subject *Ɂalwaan-u-hu* 'its colour' on the other hand, is initially generated in the thematic position within VP before rising to the inner specifier of TP.

4)   [CP [C ø] [TP *al-bayt-u* [T' *Ɂalwaan-u-hu* [T ø] [VP ~~*Ɂalwaan-u-hu*~~ *zaahiyat-un*]]]]

As such the narrow subject is the argument of the verb. While broad subjects can only precede the predicate (consider the contrast between (3) and (5a)), narrow subjects can precede or follow the predicate as in (3) (5b), respectively. Broad subjects always precede narrow subjects.

5a)* Ɂalwaan-u-hu zaahiyat-un al-bayt-u

   colours-NOM-its bright-NOM the-house-NOM

   'The house has bright colours'

b) al-bayt-u zaahiyat-un Ɂalwaan-u-hu

   the-house-NOM bright-NOM colours-NOM-its

   'The house has bright colours'

The narrow subject controls number agreement if and only if the verb follows it, whether or not there is a broad subject which cannot assign number agreement with the verb. Strictly speaking, DHs assert that the broad subjects occur in A-positions, and not in A'-positions the standard positions of left-dislocated topics. While the TP contains the verb and its arguments, the CP includes operator layer and clause typing (i.e., wh-operators, focus operators, declaratives, interrogatives, and exclamative).

Both the broad subject and the narrow subject are in a multiple specifier of T, while the broad subject occurs in the outer specifier, the broad subject occurs in the other specifier (Note 3). The narrow subject has to move to the specifier position of T in order to check features, including number agreement. The broad subject, on the other hand, is base-generated in the specifier position of T, as an A-position (Note 4). The rest of the sentence is the predicate of the broad subject through any unbound pronoun in its domain. DH assume the analysis illustrated in the following:

6)   [TP   broad subject   [TP (narrow subject) [T φ… (narrow subject (copy))…]]]

3. Against Broad Subjects in Arabic

ADH present some pieces of evidence in favour of the subjecthood of the initial NP in construction of the type (3). In what follows, I will introduce their arguments and argue against them.

First, ADH claim that a broad subject in Arabic can occur in a position following immediately a copula (an auxiliary verb, in their term):

7) kaana   l-bayt-u   ʔalwaan-u-hu   zaahiyat-an

    was the-house-NOM   colours-NOM-its   bright-ACC

    'The house was of bright colours.'

They show that this is contrary to left-dislocated phrases in English which cannot be embedded either under ECM verbs or auxiliary verbs such as (8a) and (8b), respectively:

8a)* I believed the house its colours (were/to be) bright.

b)*   Was the house its colours (were) bright.

Thus, based on the contrast between the behaviour of sentence-initial nominative NPs in Arabic and left-dislocated topics in English, DHs and ADH claim that such nominative NPs are broad subjects.

The status of the example given in (7), however, is dubious; Arabic linguists (p.c.), including myself, reject it, and in fact copula can only follow the potential broad subject (as in (9)).

9) al-bayt-u   kaanat   ʔalwaan-u-hu   zaahiyat-an

    the-house-NOM   was.3SF   colours-NOM-its   bright-ACC

'The house was in bright colours'

This indicates that the initial NP is not in A-position, but rather it is more likely in A'-position.

Second, ADH claim that, unlike left-dislocated topics, broad subjects in Arabic can follow the Exceptional Case Marking (ECM) verbs. This can be seen by the contrast between the followings.

10a) dhanan-tu   hind-a   yuqa:bilu-ha   T-Tulla:b-u

    thought-1s   Hind-ACC   meet(3M)-her   the-students

    'I believed Hind to have been met by the students.' (Note 5)

b)* dhanan-tu   hind-a   yuqa:bilu   T-Tulla:b-u

    thought-1s   Hind-ACC   meet.3SM   the-students-NOM

    'I believed Hind to have been met by the students.'

Here, as claimed by ADH the broad subject *hind-a* is freely embedded under an Exceptional Case Marking (ECM) verb, *Danant-u* 'thought' which takes a clausal complement but assigns accusative Case to the initial NP. As such property cannot be maintained for genuine left-dislocated NPs, ADH assert that topicalized phrases in Arabic cannot occur in such contexts. ADH suggest that (10b) in order to be grammatical, it would have to be not c-commanded by the ECM as in (11):

11) hind-a   yuqa:bilu   T-Tulla:b-u

    Hind-ACC   meet.3SM   the-students-NOM

    'Hind, the students are meeting.'

However, two pieces of evidence argue that (11) is not a topicalization structure, as claimed by ADH, but it is typically a focused constituent that is placed clause-initially encoded in the CP layer. The first one is that the focused NP, *hind-a*, maintains its accusative Case that it gets in its canonical position. Presumably, main clause topics are always nominative.

12) [FP [hind-a] [F' [F Ø] [TP yuqa:bilu T-Tulla:b-u ~~hind-a~~]]]

Example (11) could be an answer of the question 'Who are the students meeting?'

Left-dislocated topics, on the other hand, are always associated with a resumptive clitic and hence it is nominative (for more discussions, see Ouhalla, 1997, 1999; Moutaouakil, 1989, 1991). Consider the following:

13) hind-u   yuqa:bilu-ha   T-Tulla:b-u

Hind-NOM   meet.3SM-her   the-students-NOM

'Hind, the students are meeting.'

The second one is that the ungrammaticality of (10b) is in fact due to the accusative Case that appears on the embedded NP, *hind-a*. It is assigned its accusative Case by virtue of the transitive verb, *yuqa:bilu* (meet). The NP, *hind-a*, will already have had its Case feature valued, as accusative, and deleted, and thus will no longer be active for Case assignment. Consequently, the Case feature on the ECM verb is still active as there is no unvalued Case feature within its local domain. The resulting derivation crashes. Agree is one of the three fundamental syntactic operations in Minimalism (Chomsky, 1995). It is concerned with features and its major function is to value features which enter the derivation unvalued and to delete uninterpretable features that have no semantic content.

Returning to our discussion, example (10a), on the other hand, is grammatical as the accusative Case assigned by the verb, *yuqa:bilu* (meet), is absorbed by the clitic attached to the verb. Like all nominal expressions, clitics need Case, they absorb the Case assigned to the argument position. Hence, this Case is no longer available for further operations which involve Case or agreement features. The Case feature on the lexical NP, *hind-a*, on the other hand, is still active for further operations. So the matrix verb, *dhanan-tu* (thought), can value and delete its Case feature. More precisely, the Case assigned to the left-peripheral NP is independent of that assigned to its resumptive clitic. So, it can be concluded that it looks as though the NP in an exceptional Case marking structure can only be a topic associated with a resumptive clitic and not a focused element associated with a gap. Exceptional Case marking structure looks rather like *ʔanna*-clauses (see for example Shlonsky, 1992; Aoun et al., 2010).

Third, ADH claim that broad subjects behave like other ordinary subjects as evident by that in a coordination construction the two conjuncts can share the outer nominative NP, where it functions as the broad subject in the first conjunction and as the narrow (ordinary) subject in the second function, as exemplified in below:

14)? sayya:rt-i   lawn.u-ha   za:hiyy-un wa- maftu:hat.un   min l-ʔa'la

car(F)-my   colour.NOM-its   bright(M).NOM   and   open(F).NOM   from   above

'My car has a bright colour and is a convertible.'

Here, according to their analysis, the phrase *maftu:hat.un min l-ʔa'la* (open from above) is a predicate, which means that it is not a sentence with a null subject. However, such structure is not acceptable in MSA. One way to make it acceptable is to insert the overt pronominal subject *hia* (it) at the beginning of the second conjunct as in the following:

15) sayya:rt-i   lawn.u-ha   za:hiyy-un   wa- hia maftu:hat.un   min l-ʔa'la

car(F)-my   colour.NOM-its   bright(M).NOM   and   it   open(F).NOM   from   above

'My car has a bright colour and is a convertible.'

I refer the unacceptability of (14) to the standard assumption that each conjunct is typically the same kind of constituent as the other conjunct. So, the question that arises here is: why is it be possible to coordinate the phrase *hi maftu:hat.un min l-ʔa'la (*it open from above), but not the phrase (*maftu:hat.un min l-ʔa'la*)? A principled answer to this question could be given it terms of constituent structure. The phrase *hia maftu:hat.un min l-ʔa'la* (it open from above (15)) is a sentence with a subject and a predicate, and so can be coordinated with another similar type of a sentence (*lawn.u-ha za:hiyy-un* 'colour-its bright') which contains also a subject and a predicate. Conversely, however, the phrase *maftu:hat.un min l-ʔa'la* (open from above) is not a sentence, but it is adjectival phrase (AP) and cannot be coordinated with another type such as (*lawn.u-ha za:hiyy-un* 'colour-its bright'). Given the Split CP Hypothesis of Rizzi (1997) that TopP can be multiplied and following Alsubhi (2012), I assume that Arabic allows multiple topics (Note 6).

Fourth, ADH claim that in the distributions of broad subjects are also incompatible with left-dislocated topics in that broads subjects can follow copula verbs:

16) ka:na   l-bayt-u   ʔalwa:n-u-hu   za:hiyat-un

was.3M   the-house-NOM   colours-NOM-its   bright-NOM

"The house was of bright colours."

However, I claim that NPs *l-bayt-u* 'the house' and *ʔalwa:n-u-hu* 'its colours' should be treated as topics, given that because Arabic can have multiple topics. This claim is theoretically supported by the assumption that a given head can theoretically host unlimited number of adjuncts (Hornstein & Nunes, 2008, p. 60). Furthermore, Aoun et al. (2010, p. 235) noted that a left peripheral NP associated with a pronominal clitic within an island cannot occur in such contexts as the following (from Lebanese Arabic) shows:

17) *keenit/keeno **naadia** ʕam bixabbro S-Sabe yalli sheef-**a** nakte

Was.3sf/were.3p Nadia Asp. Tell.3p the-boy that saw.3sm-her joke

'It was the case that Nadia, they were telling the boy that saw her a joke.'

Fifth, ADH claim that in contrast to left-dislocated topics and topics, broad subjects can appear with *wh*-phrases and bare quantifiers. They illustrated the following example of a *wh*-phrase from Japanese:

18) dare-ga me-ga aoi no-desu-ka

who-NOM eyes-NOM blue gu

'Who has blue eyes?

They claim that it is possible for broad subjects in MNCs to be focus or topic, and thus the broad subject is possible but a left-dislocated topic is not possible to be a downward-entailing quantifier.

As for Arabic, ADH illustrate the following example of quantified broad subjects in Arabic (Note 7):

19) kull-u ʔinsa:n-in tuHibbu-hu ʔumm-u-hu

Every-NOM man-GEN love.3F-him mother-NOM-his

'Everyone's mother loves him.'

Lit. * 'Everyone, his mother loves him.'

ADH did not compare or contrast the properties of left-dislocated topics with broad subjects; they did not do not provide a counterpart left-dislocated construction either. However, examples like (19) have a compulsory resumption, i.e. P-stranding is not possible as the ungrammaticality of the following example illustrates:

20)* kull-u/kull-a ʔinsa:n-in tuHibbu ʔumm-u-hu

every-NOM/every-ACC man-GEN love.3F-him mother-NOM-his

'Everyone's mother loves him.'

Lit. * 'Everyone, his mother loves him.'

So, following Landau (2009), obligatory resumption is not visible to information structure, and therefore this kind of construction shows no discourse properties that exclude the analysis of left-dislocated topics.

4. The Initial Nominative NP Is a Left-Dislocated Topic

DH claim that initial nominative NPs in Arabic have the properties associated with an ordinary subject and not with a left-dislocated topic or a topicalized phrase. Thus, I will provide a number of arguments supporting the opposite position and propose that what is considered to be a Broad Subjects in DH and ADH is really a left-dislocated topic.

As for left-dislocated topics, Cinque (1990) defines it as a root clause phenomenon and each clause has only one left-dislocated topic. It is characterized by the existence of a lexical NP in the left-peripheral position and it is related to a pronominal element inside the clause. Dislocated NPs typically bear nominative Case marking in MSA. Aoun et al. (2010, pp. 191–195) observe that left-dislocated topics must precede the element of the complementizer phrase when they interact with it:

21a) zayd-un hal qaabalta-hu

Zayd-NOM Q met.2SM-him

'Zayd, did you meet him?'

b)* hal zayd-un qaabalta-hu

Q Zayd-NOM met.2SM-him

'Zayd, did you meet him?'

In embedded clauses, however, the left-dislocated topics can immediately follow the complementizer:

22) zaʕmatu   ʔanna   r-risalat-a   l-walad-u   kataba-ha

      claimd.1S   that   the-letter-ACC   the-boy-NOM   wrote.3SM-it

      'I claimed that the letter, the boy wrote it.'

Here, the complementizer *ʔinna* assigns the accusative Case to the left-dislocated topics, *r-risalat-a*.

Note that although it is possible in some languages, such as Italian, to left-dislocated a range of phrases (Cinque, 1990), in Arabic, left-dislocated topics are restricted to NPs. This is because Arabic nominal pronouns can only associate with NPs, but not with other types of phrases. An example with two initial NPs is:

23) [Ali-un   [r-risaalat-u$_j$ [ʔarsalat-ha$_j$]]]

      Ali-NOM   the-letter-NOM   sent-it

      'Ali, the letter, he sent it.'

The second NP is associated with a clitic. We can also have the other way around:

24) [r-risaalat-u$_j$ [Ali-un   [ʔarsalat-ha$_j$]]]

      the-letter-NOM   Ali-NOM   sent-it

      'Ali, the letter, he sent it.'

However, these two nominals are not a single nominal, but rather they are two separate nominals.

Furthermore, the following pair of examples suggests that the so-called broad subject in Arabic does not occupy the specifier position of the TP, but rather originates as a specifier of the TopP (=Topic Projection). So, consider the contrast between the following:

25a) Hind-un   man   yuqaabilu-ha

       Hind-NOM   who   meet-her

       'Who are meeting Hind?'

b)* man Hind-un   yuqaabilu-ha

      who Hind-NOM   meet-her

      'Who are meeting Hind?'

Here, *man* 'who' is the wh-narrow-subject, in the sense that *man* is the corresponding wh-subject of the narrow subject of the following example:

26) Hind-un   yuqaabilu-ha T-Tullaab-u

      Hind-NOM   meet-her   the-students-NOM

      'The students are meeting Hind'

      Lit. 'Hind, the students are meeting her.'

It is assumed that wh-movement is concerned with movement of wh-phrases to the left-periphery of clauses, more precisely to FocP (=Focus Projection). Given that the CP layer of clause structure can be split into a number of projections (Force Phrase, Topic Phrase, Focus Phrase and Finiteness Phrase). Thus, the proposed wh-subject occupies Spec FocP, and hence is positioned under a topic phrase. This shows that the so-called broad subject is really a left-dislocated topic in A'-position.

Unlike left-dislocated topics, broad subjects in Japanese obey locality requirement on the anaphoric link. However, the initial nominative NP in Arabic, like Hebrew (see Landau, 2009), cannot bind local anaphors:

27a) [ibnat-u Aliy-in$_i$]$_j$ ʔkhbarat Hind-a$_k$ ʔan   nafsiha$_{j/k}$/*nafsihi$_i$

      daughter-NOM Ali-GEN   told   Hind   about herself/*himself

      "Ali's daughter told Hind about herself/*himself"

b) Aliy-un$_i$, ibnat.u-hu$_j$ ʔkhbarat Hind-a$_k$ ʔan nafsiha$_{j/k}$/*nafsihi$_i$

     Ali-NOM daughter-NOM-his told   Hind   about herself/*himself

     "Ali's daughter told Hind about herself/*himself"

The oblique anaphor in (27a) can be bound either by the accusative NP, Hind, or by the whole possessive subject, *ibnat Aliy* (Ali's daughter), but definitely not by a subject-internal possessor, *Ali*. However, although this

possessor is placed in a broad subject position (27b), it cannot bind the anaphor which is rather surprising under ADH and DH's analysis. Under their analysis, the initial NP, *Ali* in (27b), is a board subject in A-position and it c-commands the anaphor within its local clause.

5. Conclusion

This paper argues against the analysis that Arabic has multiple nominative phrases as the type of Japanese. It gives evidence that pertains to the syntax of this construction that shows that they are not instances of broad subjects. The impossibility of multiple specifiers of TP in Arabic provides the essential left-peripheral A-bar-position for these initial nominative NPs. The paper proposes that these initial nominative NPs have some syntactic properties that distinguished them from "Broad Subjects". They behave like a left-dislocated topic in most respects.

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Notes

Note 1. This example is from Hideki (2017).

Note 2. ADH assume that clitic-left-dislocated NPs are generated by movement in A'-position and therefore they obey island constraints.

Note 3. This analysis is casted in a theory that permits multiple specifiers to be projected for a given head.

Note 4. ADH propose that the narrow subject occupies Spec-VP and thus partial agreement is weak in the VS order, full agreement is strong, in the other hand, and thus subject movement from Spec-VP to Spec-TP is obligatory.

Note 5. I would rather translate the verb *dhanan-tu* as to suppose. In fact, this verb belongs to certainly and doubt verbs which cause the accusative Case to both the subject/topic and its predicate.

Note 6. Furthermore, Landau (2008) shows that a construction such as (15) is dubious in Hebrew in his argument against broad subject in Hebrew. DH claim that the initial NP in Hebrew can be shared by two conjunctions.

Note 7. Benmamoun (1999) shows that quantifiers in Arabic appear in two different types of structures: the first one is that quantifiers agree with the subject they modify and associate with a resumptive clitic, whereas the second one, on the other hand, makes no agreement. The agreeing quantifier can be stranded, while the non-agreeing one can. So, to account for this contrast, Benmamoun illustrates that Arabic structures containing quantifiers are divided in two types:

i.   a construct-state-like Q-NP type in which Q heads a QP

ii.   an NP-Q type in which Q heads an adjunct that modifies the NP.

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