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The Derivation of Wh-Interrogatives in Najdi Arabic: A Right-Dislocation Analysis

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Abstract

This paper examines the derivation of wh-interrogatives in Najdi Arabic, focusing on the contrast between the canonical subject-verb-object order of declarative clauses and the verb-subject or verb-object-subject orders found in wh-questions. The analysis draws on grammaticality judgments and constructed examples from the author's native variety of Najdi Arabic. The distribution of subjects, verbs, objects, and temporal adjuncts argues against an account based solely on verb movement to C, because an overt complementizer and preverbal adjuncts may intervene while the subject remains clause-final. The paper proposes instead that declarative T bears an Extended Projection Principle feature that attracts the subject to Spec-TP, whereas interrogative clauses lack this attraction and permit the subject to undergo right dislocation. The proposed analysis preserves the standard assumption that external arguments originate in Spec-vP and derives the observed surface orders without requiring exceptional verb movement. It also connects subject placement with clause type and with the interpretation of resumptive dependencies in Najdi Arabic wh-constructions.

Keywords: Najdi Arabic; wh-interrogatives; subject-verb order; right dislocation; Extended Projection Principle

1 INTRODUCTION

The present paper investigates the implications of contrastive word orders observed in examples such as (1) in Najdi Arabic.

- (1) a). ahmad fāra al-be:t
Ahmed bought the-house.
'Ahmed bought the house.'

- b). wif fāra ahmad?
what bought Ahmed
'What did Ahmed buy?'

- c). mahad jadri [wif fāra(*-h) ahmad]
nobody knows what bought Ahmed
'Nobody knows what Ahmed bought.'

While a canonical declarative sentence such as (1a) has subject-verb-object (SVO) order,

matrix and embedded wh-interrogatives show the subject following the verb. This contrast raises two questions: where does the subject originate, and what distinguishes the derivation of wh-interrogatives from that of declarative clauses? The analysis below argues that the contrast is best captured through clause-type-sensitive subject movement and right dislocation.

Najdi Arabic is a Semitic variety spoken in the Najd region of central Saudi Arabia. It is a fusional, pro-drop variety that permits nonverbal predication and generally exhibits SVO order in declarative clauses. To make the relevant word-order contrasts transparent, the examples below contain overt subjects and lexical verbs.

Section 2 establishes the empirical generalizations and evaluates a verb-movement account. Section 3 develops the right-dislocation analysis.

1.1 Data and Method

The data consist of constructed Najdi Arabic examples evaluated by the author, a native speaker of the variety. The judgments isolate contrasts among declarative clauses, matrix wh-questions, embedded wh-interrogatives, and yes-no questions. An asterisk marks an unacceptable form, while material enclosed in parentheses represents an optional or context-dependent realization. The transcriptions are broad and are accompanied by word-by-word glosses and idiomatic English translations. Because the paper is a theoretical analysis of native-speaker judgments rather than an experimental study, no inferential statistical analysis is involved.

2 The Problem

This section defines the word-order problem, identifies the constructions in which the order changes, and evaluates possible derivations.

The central issue is where the subject originates, whether it raises in declarative and

interrogative clauses, and whether the verb undergoes movement. Subject wh-questions are therefore set aside because they do not reveal the contrast between subject-verb and verb-subject orders, as the following examples illustrate.

- (2) a). ahmad ʃara al-be:t
Ahmed bought the-house.
'Ahmed bought the house.' (=1a)
- b). min ʃara al-bet?
who bought the-house
'Who bought the house?'
- c). mahad jadri [min ʃara al-bet]
nobody knows who bought the-house
'Nobody knows who bought the house.'

2.1 Wh-Questions and Embedded Interrogatives

As shown in (1), wh-interrogatives may display a word order different from that of declarative clauses. The first task is to determine which interrogative constructions trigger the contrast.

Not all questions affect subject-verb order, as shown in (3).

- (3) a). wiʃ ʃara ahmad?
what bought Ahmed
'What did Ahmed buy?' (=1b)
- b). ahmad ʃara be:t?
Ahmed bought house
'Did Ahmed buy a house?'

Example (3) shows that yes-no questions do not display the order-altering effect found in wh-questions. In a wh-question, C bears a [WH] feature that triggers movement of the wh-expression to its specifier. The contrast therefore implicates the [WH] feature rather than interrogativity alone.

Embedded questions may also bear a [WH] feature, as in (4).

- (4) a). mahad jadri [wiʃ ʃara(*-h) ahmad]
nobody knows what bought Ahmed

'Nobody knows what Ahmed bought.'
 (=1c)

b). ana abi aRif [min elli kallam(*-ih)
 ahmad]
 I want know who that talk-him Ahmed
 'I want to know to whom Ahmed
 talked.'

The insertion of the C head *elli* 'that/who'¹ may require resumption. The broader distribution of *elli* and resumptive pronouns is not pursued here². The resumption in (4b) should not, however, be interpreted as evidence that *min* 'who' lies outside the embedded question. Najdi Arabic permits an antecedent nominal and its resumptive pronoun within the same clause, as illustrated by the topicalization facts in (5).

- (5) al-be:t {ahmad} fara(*-h) {ahmad}
 the-house Ahmed bought-it Ahmed.
 'Ahmed bought the house.'

Although the subject may surface in more than one position in (5), the resumptive pronoun is obligatory even when its antecedent is overtly realized in the same clause. This supports treating *min* 'who' in (4b) as internal to the embedded question. Both questions in (4) bear [WH] features and display the same altered subject-verb order found in the matrix wh-question in (3a). The effect cannot be attributed to embedding alone, as shown in (6).

- (6) simaʃt [in ahmad fara be:t]
 Heard.I that Ahmed bought house
 'I heard that Ahmed bought a house.'

Example (6) shows that SVO order is not exclusive to matrix declaratives; it also occurs in embedded declarative clauses. The altered order in (4) therefore follows from the interrogative status of the embedded clause rather than from embedding itself.

Having established the empirical contrast, the next subsection evaluates possible accounts.

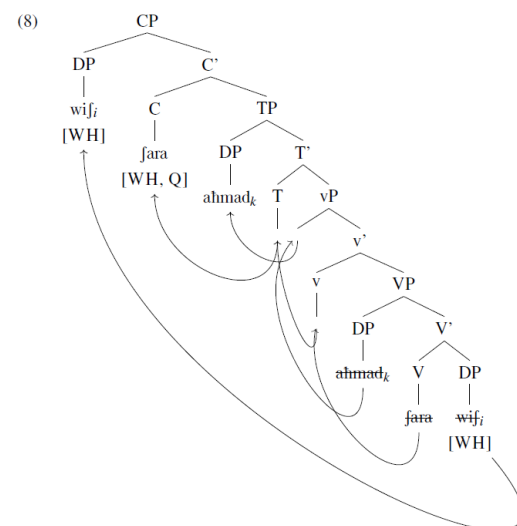
2.2 Potential Analyses

A standard assumption is that an external-argument subject originates in Spec-vP and raises to Spec-TP (Chomsky, 1995). If the subject raises to Spec-TP in the relevant interrogatives, it should precede constituents contained in vP/VP, including low adjuncts. The following examples show otherwise.

- (7) a). wif fara ams ahmad?
 what bought yesterday Ahmed?
 'What did Ahmed buy yesterday?'
 b). mita: fara al-bet: ahmad?
 when bought the-house Ahmed
 'When did Ahmed buy the house?'

Example (7) shows that an adjunct may precede the subject in a wh-question and that both the verb and object may precede it, yielding VOS order. An analysis in which the interrogative subject occupies Spec-TP therefore requires additional assumptions.

One possible derivation is represented in (8).



¹ To distinguish this item from 'which' in *aj wahid* 'which one,' it is glossed as 'that' throughout.

² The realization of resumptive pronouns interacts with the presence of *elli*, but a full account of that

interaction falls outside the present paper's focus on word order.

This analysis would preserve a unified derivation of subject movement across declaratives and interrogatives. Its crucial additional assumption, however, is verb movement to C in *wh*-questions³. The distribution of adverbs and other adjuncts argues against this analysis, as the examples in (9) show.

- (9) a). *wif fāra ams aḥmad?*
 what bought yesterday, Ahmed?
 'What did Ahmed buy yesterday?' (=7a)
- b). *wif elli ams fāra(-h) aḥmad?*
 what that yesterday bought-it Ahmed
 'What did Ahmed buy yesterday?'

The examples in (9) make the derivation in (8) implausible. In (9b), the overt C head *elli* occupies the position to which the verb is hypothesized to raise, while the adverb precedes the verb. This ordering suggests that the verb remains within the *vP*/*VP* domain. The adverb also precedes the subject, contrary to an analysis in which the subject raises to Spec-TP.

The verb-movement account therefore fails to capture the full distribution. The next section develops an alternative based on clause typing and right dislocation.

3 DISCUSSION

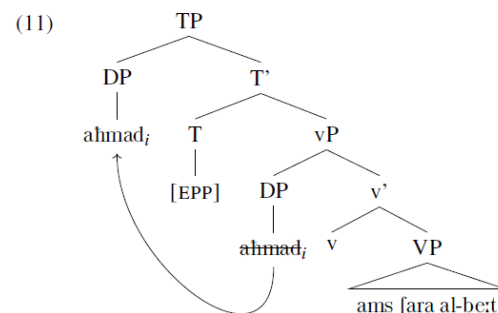
The analysis must capture the postverbal subject in *wh*-interrogatives, including cases in which the object intervenes between the verb and subject, while retaining canonical SVO order in declaratives. This section proposes that the contrast follows from clause-type-sensitive satisfaction of the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) and right dislocation of the interrogative subject.

Clauses are typed as declarative, imperative, interrogative, or exclamative (Cheng, 1991; Sadock & Zwicky, 1985). Under a clausal-typing analysis, a CP is typed

interrogative through an interrogative specifier, exclamative through an exclamative complementizer, imperative through an imperative specifier, or declarative by default (Haegeman, 2012; Roberts & Roussou, 2002). The sentence in (10), for example, is typed as declarative.

- (10) *aḥmad ams fāra al-be:t*
 Ahmed yesterday bought the-house.
 'Ahmed bought the house yesterday.'

I propose that declarative T bears an [EPP] feature that attracts the subject to Spec-TP. The sentence in (10) therefore has the structure in (11).



This analysis explains why the declarative subject precedes the verb, object, and *vP*-internal adjuncts while preserving the standard assumption that the external argument originates in Spec-*vP* before raising to Spec-TP.

Interrogative clauses bear [Q] and [WH] features on C (Chomsky, 1995). These features trigger movement of a *wh*-expression to Spec-CP and derive the clause-initial position of *wif* 'what.' They do not by themselves determine the position of the subject. The central contrasts are repeated in (12).

- (12) a). *aḥmad fāra al-be:t*
 Ahmed bought the-house.
 'Ahmed bought the house.' (=1a)

³ Negation precedes the verb and might therefore suggest that the verb does not raise to T. Because the negative element is a clitic attached to the verb in

Najdi Arabic, however, its position provides limited evidence for the height of verb movement.

b). wif fāra ahmad?
 what bought Ahmed
 'What did Ahmed buy?' (=1b)

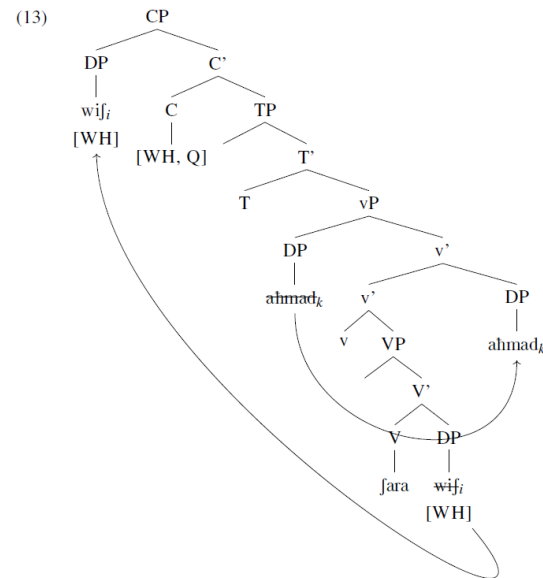
c). mahad jadri [wif fāra(*-h) ahmad]
 nobody knows what bought Ahmed
 'Nobody knows what Ahmed bought.'
 (=1c)

d). wif fāra ams ahmad?
 what bought yesterday Ahmed?
 'What did Ahmed buy yesterday?' (=7a)

e). mita: fāra al-bet: ahmad?
 when bought the-house Ahmed
 'When did Ahmed buy the house?' (=7b)

Whereas the declarative sentence in (12a) displays SVO order, the matrix and embedded wh-interrogatives in (12b-e) do not. Example (12e) is particularly revealing because the object remains in situ but still precedes the subject. Movement of the wh-expression or verb alone therefore cannot derive the full contrast.

The remaining order can be derived through *right dislocation*, a process that places a constituent at the right edge of its phrase or clause. Right-dislocation analyses have been proposed for Italian (Cardinaletti, 2001), Cantonese, and Mandarin (Yip, 2020). I propose that the interrogative clauses in (12b-e) likewise involve right dislocation of the subject. In the derivation of (12b), represented in (13), the [WH] feature on C triggers movement of wif to Spec-CP, while the subject is dislocated to the right⁴.



This derivation yields the observed order. Because the clause is interrogative, T does not attract the subject to Spec-TP under the present proposal. The subject remains low before undergoing right dislocation. One possible motivation is a constraint against adjacent overt arguments in configurations that would otherwise create ambiguity. Right dislocation may also prevent the subject from intervening between an object wh-antecedent and a resumptive pronoun attached to the verb. The contrasts in (14), in which both arguments are animate, illustrate the potential ambiguity.

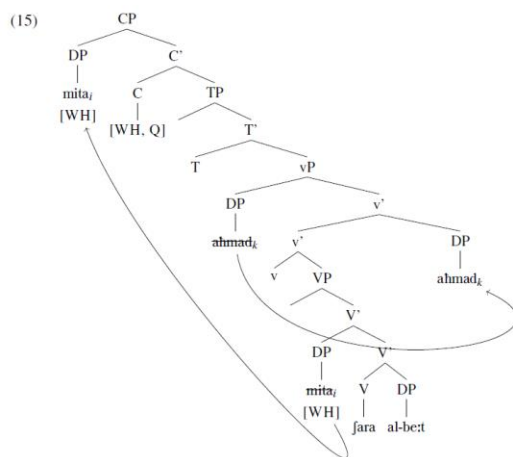
- (14) a). ahmad kallam a:lid
 Ahmed talked Khalid
 'Ahmed talked to Khalid.'
- b). min kallam ahmad?
 who talked Ahmed
 'Who talked to Ahmed?'
- c). min kallam(*-əh) ahmad?
 who talked-him Ahmed
 'Who did Ahmed talk to?'
- d). *min ahmad kallam(-əh)?
 who Ahmed talked-him?
 'Who did Ahmed talk to?' or 'Who talked to Ahmed?'

⁴ For expository clarity, the tree represents wh-movement directly from its thematic position to Spec-

CP. Nothing in the analysis precludes successive-cyclic movement through intermediate phase edges

Example (14a) establishes the declarative SVO order. The contrast between (14b) and (14c) shows that a resumptive pronoun is required for *min* 'who' to receive the object interpretation rather than being interpreted as the subject⁵. Example (14d) demonstrates the relevance of subject right dislocation: placing the subject between the wh-antecedent and the resumptive pronoun produces ambiguity and unacceptability⁶. Avoiding this intervention may motivate the rightward placement of the subject.

The VOS order in (12e) receives the derivation in (15).



mita 'when' is a temporal wh-adjunct. Its movement to Spec-CP leaves the object in situ, while right dislocation places the subject at the clause edge, thereby deriving the surface order wh-V-O-S.

Conclusion

The proposed right-dislocation analysis derives the postverbal and postobject subjects found in Najdi Arabic wh-interrogatives while preserving the standard assumption that an external argument originates in Spec-vP. Declarative T bears an [EPP] feature and attracts the subject to Spec-TP; interrogative T lacks this attraction, and the subject is instead dislocated to the right. The relevant portion of the

derivation extends from matrix to embedded wh-interrogatives.

The analysis also explains why verb movement to C is insufficient: an overt complementizer may occupy C, and an adjunct may precede both the verb and subject. Finally, the resumptive contrasts suggest a functional motivation for the rightward placement of the subject, since failure to dislocate it creates intervention, ambiguity, and unacceptability. Further work should test the proposal through a broader judgment study and an explicit analysis of prosody and information structure.

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⁵ The complementizer *elli* may also occur in (14c-d), but its inclusion is not necessary for the present contrast

⁶ Both arguments are third-person masculine singular, so the resumptive pronoun is formally compatible with either nominal.

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