

An oblique case in Arabic dialects – independent development or contact-influence

Several varieties of Arabic (especially those of the Levant, but also Maltese, some varieties of the Maghrib and others) show a phenomenon known as clitic doubling (sometimes referred to as object reduplication), defined by Souag (2017) as the „co-occurrence of a (pleonastic) anaphoric marker with a coreferential noun phrase within the same predicate expressing the same argument.“ It is illustrated by the following semantically equivalent examples from a variety of Levantine Arabic (LA):

1. a) *šif-ət Fāris* b) *šif-t-u la=Fāris.*
see.PERF-1SG Fāris see.PERF-1SG-3.SG.M.OBJ OBL-Fāris
‘I saw Fāris.’

I suggest that this phenomenon should be conceived of as an oblique case (marked by the clitic *la=* preceding the NP), because it can also introduce an NP in other syntactic functions than direct object (most precisely described by Aoun and Souag (2017)), illustrated by 2a-b:

2. a) *hak-ēt ma^ca Fāris* b) *hak-ēt ma^c-u la=Fāris.*
talk.PERF-1SG with Fāris talk.PERF-1SG with-3.SG.M OBL-Fāris
‘I talked to Fāris.’

It has been argued that this phenomenon has occurred due to contact influence, namely that of the Aramaic substratum in the case of LA and that of Berber languages in the case of Moroccan varieties (an overview of opinions is provided in Souag (2017))), while inter-dialectal contact might have spread it to other dialects like Maltese or contribute to its development therein. However, others have pointed out that there is not enough straightforward evidence for such an account (most recently Jiries (2022)) and that the situation might be far more complex, namely that the analogous or at least similar structures might have developed independently due to internal structural tendencies.

The purpose of this presentation is to support Souag (2017)’s call for a sceptical approach in deal with these constructions cross-dialectally and the also his suggestion that before claims about possible contact influence one should carry out a detailed analysis of the individual constructions (in terms of both their morphosyntax and semantics/pragmatics) in order to spot differences that might turn out to be crucial (just like similarities which might point to actual contact). I will provide some data from LA and compare them to existing descriptions of other varieties, while also arguing for the descriptive adequateness of classifying the phenomenon in LA not as mere clitic doubling, but actually a development of an oblique case. Finally I’ll discuss to what extent the observations corroborate the contact account.

References

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