

Language Typology and Universals (CL1.204)

Term Paper (Phase 5)
Universals & Miscellaneous

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Language: North Levantine Arabic

Writing System

The Arabic script is written from right to left, and always in cursive (*i.e.*, all the letters are joined). Each letter has four slightly different forms depending on whether it occurs in an initial, a medial or a final position, or independently.

Short vowels are *not* marked in text, except in the Qur'an and in pedagogical material. Long vowels (other than /a:/) are written with letters that double as consonants (/u:/ and /w/, and /i:/ and /y/).¹

These features classify the Arabic script as an *abjad*.

Diglossia

The first outline of the concept of diglossia, laid out by Ferguson, cited Arabic as a prototype of the phenomenon. He distinguished the H and L varieties of Arabic (what we have been calling *al-fusha* and *al-ammiya*), and a third, “semiformal”, variety as well.

However, these clear, binary distinctions are vague at best (and indefensible at worst). The variation between extremely formal and extremely informal Arabic, if it can be pictured discretely, is much more nuanced and fine-grained than this simplistic model.

El-Said Badawi described five levels of language use in Cairo, although these distinctions hold across the Arab world. The various levels in Badawi's model are:

- *fusha*: *al-tura:th* (or “heritage *fusha*.”)
- *fusha*: *al-'asr* (or “*fusha*: of the [present] age”)

¹Holes, Clive. *Modern Arabic: Structures, functions, and varieties*. Georgetown University Press, 2004. (page 391)

- *'ammiyat al-muthaqqafi:n* (or “*ammiya* of the [well-]educated”)
- *'ammiyat al-mutanawwiri:n* (or “*ammiya* of the literate”)
- *'ammiyat al-ʔummi:yi:n* (or “*ammiya* of the illiterate”)

Levels 1 and 2 are *qualitatively* different from levels 3, 4 and 5, in terms of their morphosyntax. The former group is based on prescriptive *fusha*, while the latter (no matter how heavily they are influenced by *fusha* vocabulary and phonology) retain numerous, clearly “dialectal”, features (like word order, expression of mood and aspect, and so on).

These two groups can be considered a more granular view of Ferguson’s bird’s-eye H/L distinction. Functionally, the usage of the various levels, described in Halliday’s framework of subject matter (“field”), the relationship among the participants (“tenor”) and the manner of expression (“mode”), can be found in Figure 1.²

Level	Field(s)	Tenor	Mode(s)
1	Islam/Classical Arabic literature/cultural history	ritualized/highly formal	written/prepared spoken monologue/reading aloud
2	Nonreligious serious (e.g., chemistry, law, politics, news bulletin)	formal	written/reading aloud
3	Same as Level 2	semiformal	extempore speech (monologue or conversation)
4	Nonserious (e.g., discussion of television programs, sport, job, fashion)	informal	conversation
5	Nonserious, domestic, uninformed by contact with modern civilization	informal	conversation (esp. with children/illiterates)

Figure 1: A Functional View of Language Level

Universals

A list of relevant universals (a subset of which are considered below) can be found in the appendix.

Phonology

Some relevant phonological universals borne out by Levantine Arabic are:

²Holes, Clive. *Modern Arabic: Structures, functions, and varieties*. Georgetown University Press, 2004. (page 341)

- It distinguishes between vowels and consonants.
- It has fewer vowels (approximately six) than consonants (approximately 30).
- It does not have less than three vowels (given the length distinction).
- It has one front high (/i/), one back high (/u/) and one low (/a/) vowel.
- It distinguishes high and low, and front and back vowels.
- There are no two phonemes differing only in that one is bilabial and one is labiodental.
- It has open syllables.
- It has syllables with and without initial consonants.

Morphology

The morphology, as we have seen, varies to a large extent through the spectrum of levels described above. Broadly, however, one can say that *al-fusha* varieties are more synthetic, while Levantine Arabic (like any other *al-ammiya* variety) is more analytic.

It is also important to note that as Arabic (all varieties) has a non-concatenative morphology, it is obviously impossible to distinguish morpheme boundaries in many cases. Further, a single inflection may carry several features (like the person-number-gender inflections of MSA). Thus Arabic may also be described as having a fusional morphology.

This is seen in the preference for the use of particles (free morphemes) over morphological strategies (for example, in *?idaafa*). In addition, the erosion of the case system for nouns in the dialects, and the more symmetric, less redundant verbal inflection system, bear this out.

Some relevant universals are:

- MSA and Levantine Arabic have both inflection and derivation.
- MSA has a plural as well as a dual.
- Both MSA and Levantine Arabic have the categories of gender as well as number.
- They have pronominal categories with three persons and at least two numbers.

Syntax

Some important syntactic universals, evidenced by Arabic's syntactic system are as follows:

- The subject precedes the object in the normal order (VSO in MSA, SVO in Levantine)

- The language has prepositions, and the genitive follows the governing noun (cf. *?idaafa*)
- MSA is VSO, and prepositional.
- SVO is the most frequent word order apart from VSO (in MSA).
- Question particles are found in an initial position in Levantine Arabic, and it is prepositional.
- The dominant order is VSO and the adjective comes after the noun (in MSA).

References

1. Holes, Clive. *Modern Arabic: Structures, functions, and varieties*. Georgetown University Press, 2004

Appendix: Universals

Typology:

1. In declarative sentences with nominal subject and object, the dominant order is almost always one in which the subject precedes the object.
2. In languages with prepositions, the genitive almost always follows the governing noun, while in languages with postpositions it almost always precedes.
3. Languages with dominant VSO order are always prepositional.
4. With overwhelmingly greater than chance frequency, languages with normal SOV order are postpositional.
5. If a language has dominant SOV order and the genitive follows the governing noun, then the adjective likewise follows the noun.
6. All languages with dominant VSO order have SVO as an alternative or as the only alternative basic order.

Syntax:

7. If in a language with dominant SOV order there is no alternative basic order, or only OSV as the alternative, then all adverbial modifiers of the verb likewise precede the verb. (This is the rigid subtype of III.)
8. When a yes-no question is differentiated from the corresponding assertion by an intonational pattern, the distinctive intonational features of each of these patterns are reckoned from the end of the sentence rather than from the beginning.
9. With well more than chance frequency, when question particles or affixes are specified in position by reference to the sentence as a whole, if ini-

tial, such elements are found in prepositional languages, and, if final, in postpositional.

10. Question particles or affixes, when specified in position by reference to a particular word in the sentence, almost always follow that word. Such particles do not occur in languages with dominant order VSO.
11. Inversion of statement order so that verb precedes subject occurs only in languages where the question word or phrase is normally initial. This same inversion occurs in yes-no questions only if it also occurs in interrogative word questions.
12. If a language has dominant order VSO in declarative sentences, it always puts interrogative words or phrases first in interrogative word questions; if it has dominant order SOV in declarative sentences, there is never such an invariant rule.
13. If the nominal object always precedes the verb, then verb forms subordinate to the main verb also precede it.
14. In conditional statements, the conditional clause precedes the conclusion as the normal order in all languages.
15. In expressions of volition and purpose, a subordinate verbal form always follows the main verb as the normal order except in those languages in which the nominal object always precedes the verb.
16. In languages with dominant order VSO, an inflected auxiliary always precedes the main verb. In languages with dominant order SOV, an inflected auxiliary always follows the main verb.
17. With overwhelmingly more than chance frequency, languages with dominant order VSO have the adjective after the noun.
18. When the descriptive adjective precedes the noun, the demonstrative and the numeral, with overwhelmingly more than chance frequency, do likewise.
19. When the general rule is that the descriptive adjective follows, there may be a minority of adjectives which usually precede, but when the general rule is that descriptive adjectives precede, there are no exceptions.
20. When any or all of the items (demonstrative, numeral, and descriptive adjective) precede the noun, they are always found in that order. If they follow, the order is either the same or its exact opposite.
21. If some or all adverbs follow the adjective they modify, then the language is one in which the qualifying adjective follows the noun and the verb precedes its nominal object as the dominant order.
22. If in comparisons of superiority the only order, or one of the alternative orders, is standard-marker-adjective, then the language is postpositional. With overwhelmingly more than chance frequency if the only order is adjective-marker-standard, the language is prepositional.
23. If in apposition the proper noun usually precedes the common noun, then the language is one in which the governing noun precedes its dependent genitive. With much better than chance frequency, if the common noun usually precedes the proper noun, the dependent genitive precedes its governing noun.
24. If the relative expression precedes the noun either as the only construction

- or as an alternate construction, either the language is postpositional, or the adjective precedes the noun or both.
25. If the pronominal object follows the verb, so does the nominal object.

Morphology:

26. If a language has discontinuous affixes, it always has either prefixing or suffixing or both.
27. If a language is exclusively suffixing, it is postpositional; if it is exclusively prefixing, it is prepositional.
28. If both the derivation and inflection follow the root, or they both precede the root, the derivation is always between the root and the inflection.
29. If a language has inflection, it always has derivation.
30. If the verb has categories of person-number or if it has categories of gender, it always has tense-mode categories.
31. If either the subject or object noun agrees with the verb in gender, then the adjective always agrees with the noun in gender.
32. Whenever the verb agrees with a nominal subject or nominal object in gender, it also agrees in number.
33. When number agreement between the noun and verb is suspended and the rule is based on order, the case is always one in which the verb precedes and the verb is in the singular.
34. No language has a trial number unless it has a dual. No language has a dual unless it has a plural.
35. There is no language in which the plural does not have some nonzero allomorphs, whereas there are languages in which the singular is expressed only by zero. The dual and the trial are almost never expressed only by zero.
36. If a language has the category of gender, it always has the category of number.
37. A language never has more gender categories in nonsingular numbers than in the singular.
38. Where there is a case system, the only case which ever has only zero allomorphs is the one which includes among its meanings that of the subject of the intransitive verb.
39. Where morphemes of both number and case are present and both follow or both precede the noun base, the expression of number almost always comes between the noun base and the expression of case.
40. When the adjective follows the noun, the adjective expresses all the inflectional categories of the noun. In such cases the noun may lack overt expression of one or all of these categories.
41. If in a language the verb follows both the nominal subject and nominal object as the dominant order, the language almost always has a case system.
42. All languages have pronominal categories involving at least three persons and two numbers.

43. If a language has gender categories in the noun, it has gender categories in the pronoun.
44. If a language has gender distinctions in the first person, it always has gender distinctions in the second or third person, or in both.
45. If there are any gender distinctions in the plural of the pronoun, there are some gender distinctions in the singular also.

Phonology:

Vowels

46. All languages distinguish between vowels and consonants.
47. In a vast majority of languages the number of vowels is less than the number of consonants.
48. No language has less than three vowels (Moroccan Arabic has exactly three).
49. In languages with three vowels, there is always one front high, one back high and one low vowel.
50. No language has more than 46 vowels (Khmer).
51. All languages make a distinction between high and low vowels.
52. All languages make a distinction between front and back vowels
53. The number of distinctions tends to be greater in the higher vowels than in the low vowels.
54. Front vowels tend to be unrounded, back vowels tend to be rounded.

Consonants

55. All languages make a distinction between labial (lips) and lingual (tongue) articulation.
56. Very few languages divide the lingual consonants into coronal (front part of the tongue) and dorsal (back part of the tongue).
57. While the lower lip can be combined with the upper lip (bilabial) or with the teeth (labio-dental), the distinction between bilabial and labio-dental is never utilized as a distinctive feature. It is never the only feature distinguishing two phonemes.
58. Since the corona (the front part of the tongue) is the largest and the most flexible of the active articulatory organs, it provides more room for variation than dorsum (the back of the tongue) and labium (the lips).
59. Obstruents tend to be voiceless. Sonorants tend to be voiced.

Phonotactics

60. All languages have syllables ending in a vowel (open syllables, no coda, (C)V), but not necessarily syllables ending in a consonant (closed syllable, coda, (C)VC).
61. All languages have syllables with an initial consonant (onset, CV(C)), but not necessarily syllables without an initial consonant (no onset, V(C)).

62. All languages that allow VC, allow also CVC and V, as well as the universal CV.