

The Canonical Object and Other Objects in Arabic

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Abstract—The grammatical relation object has not attracted the same attention in the literature as subject has. Where there is a clearly monotransitive verb such as kick, the criteria for identifying the grammatical relation may converge. However, the term object is also used to refer to phenomena that do not subsume all, or even most, of the recognized properties of the canonical object. Instances of such phenomena include non-canonical objects such as the ones in the so-called double-object construction i.e., the indirect object and the direct object as in (He bought his dog a new collar). In this paper, it is demonstrated how criteria of identifying the grammatical relation object that are found in the theoretical and typological literature can be applied to Arabic. Also, further language-specific criteria are here derived from the regularities of the canonical object in the language. The criteria established in this way are then applied to the non-canonical objects to demonstrate how far they conform to, or diverge from, the canonical object. Contrary to the claim that the direct object is more similar to the canonical object than is the indirect object, it was found that it is, in fact, the indirect object rather than the direct object that shares most of the aspects of the canonical object in monotransitive clauses.

Keywords—Canonical objects, double-object constructions, direct object, indirect object, non-canonical objects.

I. INTRODUCTION

THIS paper is a study of the canonical object and other non-canonical objects which share with the canonical object the grammatical label object, namely the indirect object and the direct object. It investigates the criteria that are definitional of the canonical object in Arabic. Also, it explores the characteristics of the non-canonical objects and it indicates the extent to which the non-canonical objects behave similarly to or distinctly from the canonical object. This is done by applying a number of the syntactic processes found in the literature on characterizing objects (see for instance [1]-[8]). These syntactic processes involve passivization, adverb insertion, fronting, relativization, pronominalization, and question formation. The result is a characterization of the three categories of objects in the Arabic language. The data in the present paper involve constructed examples that are based on instances from the Oxford Arabic corpus and the Web. Besides, the intuitive judgements on the different structures are checked with speakers of the language and they are found consistent with the judgements of the author of the paper. The following section (§2) of this article is a delimitation of the object categories that are examined in the present paper. The other two sections (§3 & 4) are a presentation of the behaviour of the object categories with respect to the various syntactic operations. The last section summarizes the results of the comparison and displays the concluding remarks.

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II. DELIMITATION OF THE OBJECT CATEGORIES IN ARABIC

The canonical object is an accusative-cased marked noun phrase (NP) that is selected by an obligatorily transitive verb. It typically occurs after the verb in Arabic and it carries the semantic role THEME. The NP that represents the canonical object is characterized by a number of individuation properties namely that the NP is countable, singular, definite and referential (see for instance [9]). An example of an obligatorily transitive verb and its canonical object is given in (1).

- 1) rakala fahad **il-kurat-a**
kick Fahad the-ball-ACC
'Fahad kicked the ball.'

As for the non-canonical objects, there are the two objects that are found in the so-called double-object construction. They occur with a ditransitive verb such as *?aṣṭā* 'give'. The first object carries the semantic role RECIPIENT/BENEFICIARY and the second object carries the semantic role THEME. The two objects are referred to as the indirect object and the direct object respectively. In (2) *laylā* 'Layla' is the indirect object and *wardatan* 'a flower' is the direct object.

- 2) ?aṣṭat maryā laylā wardat-an
give Marya Layla.ACC flower-ACC
'Marya gave Layla a flower.'

In the sections below, the criteria that are found in the literature in characterizing objects are applied on the various objects under study. These include a number of syntactic processes such as passivation, adverb insertion, fronting, relativization, question formation, and pronominalization.

III. THE CANONICAL OBJECT

The first criterion is passivizability i.e., the possibility or not of the object to become the subject of the passive verb. In fact, passivization is often seen as the most common criterion associated with identifying the canonical object. In Arabic, the passive form of the verb involves a change in the vowels of the active verb. The passive form of the perfect verb involves the vowels /-u -i-/ and the imperfect involves /-u -a-/ (see [10]). In the example in (3), the canonical object given in (1), is made a passive subject.

- 3) r<u>k<i>lati il-kurat-u
<pass>kick the-ball-NOM
'The ball was kicked.'

As for the criterion of adverb insertion, the canonical object is selected by a transitive verb and needs be adjacent to it. Therefore, according to [11] and [4] the canonical object does not allow an optional element such as an adverb to be inserted between it and the verb. In Arabic, the canonical object bans the

insertion of an adverb when the NP is definite; therefore, the sentence in (4) is unacceptable but the sentence in (5) is acceptable.

- 4) *rakala fahad sarīṣan il-kurat-a
kick Fahad quickly the-ball-ACC
'Fahad kicked quickly the ball.'
5) rakala fahad il-kurat-a sarīṣan
kick Fahad-ACC the-ball- quickly
'Fahad kicked the ball quickly.'

Fronting is another criterion whereby the behavior of the canonical object is investigated. The process involves moving of a postverbal element to a left peripheral position and a gap in the sentence as defined in [12]. The canonical object which is typically a definite NP is not a good candidate for fronting in Arabic as can be seen in (6). However, when it is indefinite, it can be fronted as when to focus a contrast. For example, in (7) the meaning implied is that Fahad kicked the ball and that he did not kick something else.

- 6) *il-kurat-a rakala fahad
the-ball-ACC kick Fahad
'The ball, Fahad kicked.'
7) kurat-an rakala fahad
the-ball-ACC kick Fahad
'A ball, Fahad kicked.'

Therefore, it could be said that the constraint on the canonical object with respect to the adverb insertion and the fronting process can be related to the requirement of the canonical object adjacency to the verb.

The other criterion that indicates distinctive behavior of the canonical object is that of relativization; it can be relativized using one of two strategies i.e., the resumptive pronoun strategy or the gap strategy as given in [12]. This aspect of the canonical object is indicated in (8).

- 8) ?inna il-kurat-a illatī rakala=hā/ fahad
EMPH.PRT the-ball-ACC which kick=3SG Fahad
hiya kurat=ī
3SG ball=my
'The ball which Fahad kicked is my ball.'

The canonical object can be an answer to a question with *māḍā* 'what' when it is a [-human] noun as can be seen in (9). However, when it is [+human] it can be questioned with *man* 'who' as in (10).

- 9) Q: **māḍā** rakala fahad
what kick fahad
'What did Fahad kick?'

A: il-kurat-a
The-ball-ACC

- 10) Q: **man** rakala fahad
who kick Fahad
'Who did Fahad kick?'

A: laylā
Layla.ACC

The canonical object can be pronominalized i.e., it can be substituted by a personal pronoun. The canonical object *il-kurata* 'the ball' is replaced by the third person singular pronoun *hā* in the sentence given in (11).

- 11) rakala=**hā** fahad

kick=3FSG fahad
'Fahad kicked it.'

Table I summarizes the behavior of the canonical object with respect to the various syntactic processes.

TABLE I
BEHAVIOUR OF THE CANONICAL OBJECT WITH RESPECT TO THE SIX
PROCESSES

The Syntactic Behaviour	The Behaviour
Passivization	√
adverb Insertion	X
Fronting	X
Relativization	Relativized with a gap or the resumptive pronoun strategy
Pronominalization	Can be pronominalized with a personal pronoun
Questioning	Questioned with <i>māḍā</i> 'what' when it is [-human] and <i>man</i> 'who' when it is [+human]

IV. THE INDIRECT AND THE DIRECT OBJECTS

As for the first criterion i.e., passivization, the indirect object given in (12) can be made a passive subject in the same way the canonical object can as can be seen in (13). In contrast, the direct object cannot be passivized as represented by the ungrammaticality of the example in (14).

- 12) ?aṣṭat maryā laylā wardat-an
give Marya Layla.ACC flower-ACC
'Marya gave Layla a flower.'

- 13) ?<u>ṣṭ<i>yat **laylā** wardat-an
give Layla.NOM flower-ACC
'Layla was given a flower.'

- 14) *?<u>ṣṭ<i>yat **wardat-un** laylā
<PASS>give flower-NOM Layla.NOM
'A flower was given Laylā.'

An acceptable version of (14) is that where the RECIPIENT i.e. *laylā* 'Layla' is expressed as a prepositional phrase rather than as an NP as shown in (15).

- 15) *?<u>ṣṭ<i>yat wardat-un li-laylā
<PASS>give flower-NOM to-Layla.GEN
'A flower was given to Layla.'

The indirect object exhibits the same constraint found on the canonical object when it comes to adverb insertion. When the indirect object is definite, it does not allow insertion as can be seen in (16). As for the direct object, it allows adverb insertion whether or not it is definite. In (17), the direct object is definite and an adverb is inserted before it.

- 16) *sa-tuṣṭī maryā fawran laylā
FUT-give Marya immediately Layla.ACC
wardat-an
flower-ACC

'Marya will give immediately Layla a flower.'

- 17) sa-tuṣṭī maryā laylā fawran
FUT-give Marya Layla.ACC immediately
wardat-an/il-wardat-a
flower-ACC/the-flower

'Marya will give Laylā immediately a flower/the flower.'

As for the process of fronting, the indirect object is similar to the canonical object in that it does not represent a good candidate for fronting. Therefore, the sentence in (18) sounds

awkward since the indirect object *laylā* 'Layla' is fronted. On the contrary, the sentence in (19) is Ok where the direct object is fronted whether it is a definite or indefinite NP.

- 18) ??**laylā** ?aʕtay=tu wardat-an
Layla.ACC give=1SG flower-ACC
'Layla, I gave a flower.'
- 19) **wardat-an/il-wardat-a** ?aʕtay=tu laylā
flower-ACC the-flower-ACC give=1SG Layla.ACC
'A flower/the flower, I gave Layla.'

It could thus be also said here, as mentioned above about the canonical object, that the indirect object does not allow fronting or adverb insertion due to the verb adjacency requirement.

As for the relativization process, here the direct object exhibits a similar behavior to the canonical object. It allows the two strategies i.e. the resumptive pronoun strategy and the gap strategy as shown in (20). In contrast, the indirect object allows the resumptive pronoun strategy, and the sentence sounds awkward with the gap strategy as indicated in (21).

- 20) ?inna **il-wardat-a** illatī ?aʕtay=tu=**hā**/_
EMPH.PRT the-flower-ACC which gave=1SG=3SG
laylā kānat zahriyyatan
Layla was pink
'The flower which I gave Layla was pink.'
- 21) ?inna **il-fatāt-a** illatī ?aʕtay=tu=**hā**/??_
EMPH.PRT the-girl-ACC who gave=1SG=3SG
wardat-an hiya ʕadīqat=ī
flower-ACC is friend=my
'The girl whom I gave a flower is my friend.'

The other syntactic process is that of question formation; the direct object which is often [-human] can be an answer to a question with *māḍā* 'what' as demonstrated in (22). The indirect object which is often [+human] can be questioned with *man* 'who' as in (23). Accordingly, the two objects do not exhibit distinct behavior from the canonical object with regard to questioning and the distinction is mainly related to whether the NP is [+/- human].

- 22) Q: **māḍā** ?aʕtat maryā laylā
What give Marya Layla.ACC
'What did Marya give Layla?'
- A: **wardat-an**
flower-ACC
- 23) Q: **man** ?aʕtayt=i=hā wardat-an
Who give=2SG=3SG flower-ACC
'Who did you give a flower?'
- A: **laylā**
Layla.ACC

As for the process of pronominalization, the two objects do not exhibit distinctions. Like the canonical object, they can be easily pronominalized with a personal pronoun as can be seen in the example in (24) and (25).

- 24) ?aʕtay=tu=**hā** wardat-an
give=1SG=3SG flower-ACC
'I gave her a flower'
- 25) ?aʕtay=tu=**hā** lylā
give=1SG=3SG Layla
'I gave it Layla'

Table II summarizes the behavior of the direct and the

indirect object with respect to the prototypical aspects of the canonical object.

TABLE II
BEHAVIOR OF THE CANONICAL OBJECT WITH RESPECT TO THE SIX PROCESSES

Canonical Object Behaviour	Direct Object	Indirect Object
Passivization	X	√
Ban Adverb Insertion	X	√
Ban Fronting	X	√
Relativization with gap and resumptive pronoun strategy	√	with the resumptive pronoun strategy
Pronominalization with a personal pronoun	√	√
Questioning with <i>māḍā</i> 'what' and <i>man</i> 'who'	with <i>māḍā</i> 'what'	with <i>man</i> 'who'

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The canonical object in Arabic is characterized by a number of prototypical properties. The most prototypical aspect is that of passivization. Of the two objects in the double object construction, the indirect object is a good candidate for passivization where as the direct object cannot be passivized. Moreover, the canonical object bans adverb insertion and fronting when it is a definite NP and similarly does the indirect object. However, the contrary holds for the direct object with respect to these two syntactic processes. This constraint on the canonical object and the indirect object can be related to the verb-adjacency requirement that characterizes the two objects. Relativization with two strategies i.e. the resumptive pronoun and the gap strategy is another prototypical aspect of the canonical object in Arabic. The indirect object can be relativized with the resumptive pronoun strategy though not the gap strategy due again to verb adjacency requirement. The direct object behaves similarly to the canonical object with respect to relativization; it can be relativized with either the resumptive pronoun strategy or the gap strategy. The other aspects of the canonical object include pronominalization with a personal pronoun and that it is a possible answer to a question with *māḍā* 'what' or *man* 'who'. The indirect and the direct objects can also be pronominalized with a personal pronoun. The indirect object is typically [-human] and is hence a good candidate for questioning with *man* 'who' and the direct object is typically [-human] and hence can be questioned with *māḍā* 'what'. Accordingly, it can be seen that the indirect object is more similar to the canonical object than is the direct object. The indirect object shares all the six aspects except that it does not allow the gap strategy, an aspect that can be related to the verb adjacency requirement. On the other hand, the indirect object behaves differently from the canonical object with respect to three processes: it cannot be made a passive subject, it allows adverb insertion, and it can be fronted whether it is a definite or indefinite NP. Therefore, the present paper revalidates the proposal by Dryer in [2], in contrast to Hudson's as proposed in [5], which states that it is rather the indirect object and not the direct object that is similar to the canonical object. Moreover, the paper reveals prototypical characteristics of the canonical object in the Arabic language and how the objects in the double-object construction are similar to or distinct from the canonical object.

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