
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nunation in Arabic

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, Nunation is a phenomenon in Arabic that signals the Case of a noun or adjective. It is marked by the inflection of the final letter in a word with a diacritical mark called "tanwin" represented by the letter /n/ in transliteration. The nunation is reminiscent of Semitic constructions, and it is constrained to be strictly attached to the head noun, just like the case in construct state constructions (CSCs) where the embedded genitive NP must be strictly adjacent to the head noun. The fact that they both (nunation-structures and CSCs) are in complementary distribution suggests that they should be treated similarly. Based on observations, Jarrah & Zibin (2016) argue that the nunation suffix, -n, is used to fill the head position in a determiner phrase when the definite article or a personal pronoun does not occupy the latter. This argument raises several questions in both syntax and morphology. In this paper, I suggest a new analysis of the Arabic nunation as a complement attaching to the head and absorbing Case marking. Viewed this way, the nunation affix in Arabic illustrates the complement in the head-complement pattern of grammatical relations.

KEYWORDS

Nunation, tanwi:n, Affixes, Case Marking, Standard Arabic

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1. Properties of Construct States DPs

In Standard Arabic, the use of nunation is mandatory and consistently applied in both speech and writing. It indicates the grammatical state of a noun or an adjective, such as the nominative, accusative, and genitive Cases. Its usage depends on the grammatical position of the word in a sentence, and it can differ between subject and predicate, or between prepositional phrase and object. It is well-known that Standard Arabic has a rich inflectional system in which nouns and adjectives occur in three different Case forms: nominative, accusative, and genitive. For example, the noun "ba:b" (door) would become "ba:b-un" (nominative), "ba:b-an" (accusative), and "ba:b-in" (genitive) when marked with nunation. Nunation is an essential aspect of understanding the Arabic language, and its grammar, as it helps to convey precise meaning and context.

The CSD, or construct state DP, is a unique feature of head-initial languages such as Arabic, Hebrew, and Persian. This construction is characterized by a head noun (X) followed by a genitive DP (Y), as outlined in (1) (refer to Benmamoun, 2000; Borer, 1999; Aboudi, 1987, Almansour 2012, Bardeas 2008). X and Y must be adjacent and represent various relationships, such as action-theme, possessed-possessor, and more (see examples 1a, 1b, and 1c). Notably, X cannot take the definite determiner 'al 'the' or the nunation suffix -n, as shown in (3a-b). However, the genitive DP (Y) can take either (4a) or (4b). The nunation suffix -n only appears when the genitive DP or a personal pronoun does not occupy the head complement position.

(1) a. hub al-ḥi:yat-i

love DEF-life-GEN

'Life love'

b. ibtisamat-u al-walad-i

smile.NUM DEF-boy-GEN

'The boy's smile'

c. siyarat-u l-jar-i

car-NUM DEF-neighbor -GEN

'The neighbor's car'

The surface word order pattern is head-initial, for example, in (1a), *hub* 'love' is the head of the CSD and its complement is the genitive DP *l-hiyat-i* 'the life'. In Arabic (and Hebrew, see Ritter 1986), the complement in CSD constructions must be assigned genitive case (cf. Mohammad 2000). An important fact: it is not possible to have either the definite marker or the nunation /n/ on the nominal head in such constructions, as in (2a) and (2b), respectively. (Nunation is conventionally abbreviated to NUN in the examples).

(2) a.* al-siyarat-u al-jar-i

DEF-car-NUM DEF-neighbor-GEN

'The neighbor's car'

b.* siyarat-un al-jar-i

car-NUM.NUN neighbor-GEN

'The neighbor's car'

As can be seen in examples in (3), the nunation /n/ merely alternates with the definite marker. The nunation is the consonant chosen in the absence of the definite marker.

(3) a. siyarat-u al-jar-i

Car-NUM DEF-neighbor-GEN

'The neighbor's car'

b. siyarat-u jar-in

car-NOM neighbor-GEN.NUN

'The neighbor's car'

The value of definiteness of the complement represents the whole SCD definiteness value. It is worth mentioning that the Arabic language syntactically encodes morphological elements pre-affixed to constituents (Fassi-Fehri, 2012). Therefore, like Italian and other Romance languages (Chierchia, 1998), D is phonologically null in underspecifying nouns for indefiniteness.

2. Nunation and Indefiniteness

The addition of a short-vowel phoneme suffix in Arabic is marked by the letter "h". Typically, this is followed by the letter "n" in a process known as tanwīn. Nunation is the English term used to describe the practice of adding the letter "nu:n" to a word.

Buckley (2004:19) claims that apart from proper names, the presence of the definite article renders the noun definite, while its absence renders the noun indefinite. On the other hand, Haywood & Nahmad (1965: 22), and Ryding (2005: 156) assert

that the presence of the nunation indicates indefiniteness, and accordingly, nunation is considered an indefinite marker. Ryding states that “in Arabic, the definiteness marker is attached to the beginning of a word and the indefiniteness is attached to the end of a word”. Ryding (2005: 164) adds that “they [proper names] are semantically definite but morphologically indefinite.” This statement comes from the fact that most proper names in Arabic are derived from adjectives and participles which are subject to nunation. The question being raised here is whether nunation is an indefinite marker. Alghamdi (2015) argues that it is not. He asserts that the possibility of having nunation with names provides evidence that nunation cannot be an indefinite marker. This is because names are inherently definite and nunation can functionally attach to nouns of which names are a part. Therefore, assuming that names are generally definite, nunation cannot be an indefinite marker by logic. For example, consider the following examples (Fassi Fehri, 1993:216-217), which demonstrate that nunation is allowed to attach to names.

(4) a. Hind-un

Hind-NUM.NUN

‘Hind’

b. Muḥammad-un

Muhammad-NOM.NUN

‘Muhammad’

Thus, assuming that nunation is not an indefinite marker, one would expect it to co-occur with definite nouns. However, this prediction is incorrect because nunation cannot appear on nouns with the definite article (-al). Consider the following:

(5) * al-bait-un

DEF-house-NOM.NUN

‘The house’

The occurrence of the definite article (al-) in sentences such as (6) results in blocking the affixation of the nunation of the nominal morpheme to the relevant DPs, and hence (6) is ungrammatical. By contrast, when the definite article (al-) in nouns does not raise and adjoin the noun, affixing nunation to a noun results in a grammatical phrase. Fassi Fehri (1993) and Lyons (1999) discussed the restriction on the complementation relation between definite DPs and nunation. They assume that nunation and the definite article (al-) are mutually exclusive because the definite article is a marker of definiteness, while nunation indicates indefiniteness. To challenge any function assigned to nunation based on this distribution, one must consider some examples where nunation and the definite article (al-) are not exclusive. Such examples are not possible. Similarly, Alsubhi (2012: 24-25) also considers the view that nunation is an indefinite article in Arabic for two reasons; firstly, the complementary distribution between nunation and the definite article (al-) is fine, while it is not possible between nunation and definite proper names as in (7):

(6) * al-Muḥammad-un

DEF-Muhammad-NOM.NUN

‘Muhammad’

Secondly, assuming nunation is not an indefinite marker, it is not clear why nunation cannot co-occur with the definite article (al-).

3. Previous Accounts for Nunation

This section examines the relevant proposals regarding the suffix nunation in Arabic. The suffix nunation in the traditional view’s analysis has always been puzzling. Most Arabic grammarians, such as Sibawayh, treat nunation as a morphological feature that can distinguish between nouns and verbs. Nunation is only restricted to nouns and never attaches to verbs or prepositions. According to them, it is a sign of what is so-called *tamkīn* (complete nominality or an NP that could be overtly assigned Case is traditionally known). A question that could be asked at this point is: why is this phenomenon only complementary with nouns and not with other categories? at most, this explanation is only descriptive and does not present any concrete evidence of the actual essence of nunation. If one would propose an explanation of nunation, this point must be considered; otherwise, the truth may

become unclear. I will explain the reason behind this fact in the following sections.

For traditional perspectivists, nunation also serves a purpose called "non-specification" where -n is added to proper nouns. If a proper noun doesn't have the nunation -n, the speaker is referring to a particular person. (as seen in 8a). On the other hand, if -n is present on a proper noun, it suggests that the person being referred to is not specific (as in 8b). By observing the use of -n on proper nouns, one can determine whether the speaker is familiar with the person being discussed. Consider the following examples:

(7) a. qaabal-tu Si:bawai:h

met-1SG Si:bawai:h

'I met Si:bawai:h.'

b. qaabal-tu Si:bawai:h-an

met-1SG Si:bawai:h-ACC.NUN

'I met a Siibawaiih.'

In (8a), the absence of the nunation on the NP *Siibawaiih* makes the entity indeclinable following the declension system used in Arabic. However, in (8b), the non-specific entity is represented by the inclusion of a nunation on the NP, *Siibawaiih-an*.

For other Arabic dialects, Jarrah and Zibin (2016b) argue that that Case is not correlated with nunation in Haili Arabic, as previously suggested and supported by Ingham (1994) and Brustad (2000) concerning Arabic varieties. Ingham (1994) and Brustad (2000) believe that the -n suffix is not associated with case assignment. They assume that the absence of -n on definite NPs, typically designated by the definite article 'al-', would suggest that -n functions as an "indefinite-specific marker" (Brustad 2000: 28). Brustad (2000) uses Ingham's (1994) explanation of Najdi Arabic to provide evidence of her assertion about the nunation suffix, which she regards as an indefinite-specific marker. Consider the following examples from Najdi Arabic.

(8) a. baab-in saghi:r

door-NUN small

'A small door'

b. rajl-in min al-rija:l

man-NUN of DEF-men

'One man of the men.'

c. na:qt-in warr-o:-ha:-li

camel-NUN showed-they-it-me

'A camel which they showed me.'

Similarly, Ingham (1994) notes that -n is added to the nouns which are modified by an AP, PP, or relative clause (as shown in examples 9a-c). However, as observed by Jarrah and Zibin (2016b), the fact that nouns that are associated with nunation are often accompanied by additional facts. If we suppose that this additional information serves to specify the noun, then Ingham's account aligns. Jarrah and Zibin (2016a) argue that nunation triggers the speaker to provide additional details to clarify the NP associated with the -n. Therefore, the APs, PPs, or relative clauses act as "balancing materials" that establish the sentence's definiteness condition and enhance its understanding. However, this argument may not be applicable to other dialects, unlike in Standard Arabic.

On the other hand, Fassi Fehri (1993: 216) notes that Arab syntacticians have struggled for many years to understand the role of nunation. They have often treated it as an indefinite marker due to its apparent correlation with the definite article, but Fassi Fehri (1993) argues that this approach is not very logical. The fact that proper nouns can also have an indefinite marker undermines this argument. Furthermore, Fassi Fehri (1993: 216) suggests that while in some structures, such as genitive possessive constructions with proper nouns, both the definite marker and the nunation are prohibited from showing on the head of the

structure, in adjectival genitive constructions, only the nunation is absent. Examples (10c) and (10d) demonstrate this point in Standard Arabic, as referred to by Fassi Fehri (1993: 217–218).

- (9) a. * ra?ai:-tu al-ba:b-a al-kulliyat-i
saw-1SG DEF-door-ACC DEF-college-GEN
'I saw the door of the college.'¹
- b. * ra?ai-tu ba:b-an al-kulliyat-i
saw-1SG door-ACC DEF-college-GEN
'I saw the door of the college.'
- c. Ali-un jami:l-u al-wajh-i
Ali-NOM handsome-NOM DEF-face-GEN
'Ali has a handsome face.'
- d. qa:bal-tu al-walad-a al-jamiil-a ?al-wajh-i
met-1SG DEF-boy-ACC DEF-handsome-F-ACC DEF-face-GEN
'I met the boy with the beautiful face.'

The instances mentioned in (10) exemplify the lack of both the definite marker and nunation in nominal genitives, on the other hand, the absence of nunation is observed in adjectival genitives. From this point, Fassi Fehri (1993) suggests that the manifestation of "-n" represents the Possessive head, because it only actualizes Possession when the Possessor is not present. The fundamental point can be made is that possessive nominal structures do not obtain a possessor role within the lexical projection of N, but reasonably from a theoretical functional theta marker known as Possessive.

4. Jarrah & Zibin's Proposal

Jarrah & Zibin (2016) (j&z) argue that the nunation suffix, -n, is used to occupy the position of the head in a DP (i.e. the head D° position) when the definite article or a personal pronoun does not occupy the latter. Following Abney's (1987) proposal, they assert that NPs are grammatically determiner phrases (DPs), thus, the head of the phrase is D°, and N°. They argue that nunation affix, -n, is used interchangeably with the definite marker ?al 'the', which is commonly proposed to fill the head D° position (see Fassi Fehri 1993; 1999; 2012; Siloni 1997; Shlonsky 2004; Ouhalla 2011). Consider the following example (J&Z: 47):

- (10) * al-walad-in
DEF-boy-NUN
Intended: 'The boy'

It is not possible to have both the nunation suffix and the definite article together. Either one of them is possible. When the definite marker is absent, the nunation suffix can be applied. This proposal, following Z&J, complies with the Head D° Condition (HDC), which states that D° in Haili Arabic must be overtly filled. Thus, the suffix nunation must occupy this position when the definite article is not available. However, Z&J's analysis is limited to Haili Arabic (and possibly other Arabic dialects) and does not apply to SA if Case marking is concerned.

Secondly, the assumption that the nunation suffix occupies the same position would face at least one problem. In syntax, they should occupy different positions because the definite article is a prefix and nunation is a suffix. The derivation of this form is derived by adding the suffix -n to the root of the noun (Alsubhi, 2012).

Thirdly, according to Z&J's approach, DPs can optionally have an overt D° or empty D°, so when it is overt, it is either filled by the definite article or the suffix nunation, like cases of definite DPs or indefinite DPs. On the other hand, if D° is not available, the D°

¹ List of abbreviations: 1: First Person, 2: Second Person, 3: Third Person, SG: Singular, PL: Plural, M: Masculine, F: Feminine, NOM: Nominative Case, ACC: Accusative Case, GEN: Genitive Case, DEF: Definitive, NUN: Nunation.

head will not be filled, like in cases of indefinite DPs or proper nouns (given that proper nouns have empty D^0 , cf. Givón 2001). However, this approach might turn out to be problematic for the following reason: It is odd to treat D^0 as an overt head in some structures but not in other structures, and more so, it is not clear at all how to account for the diversity of the suffix nunation system in the constructions of indefinite DPs.

5. The Current Proposal

It is well-known that (see Fassi Fehri, 2012, and others) Definiteness Spreading (DS) is a phenomenon observed in the Construct State (CS) of SA, whereby the definiteness value of the CS is influenced by the definiteness of its embedded genitive phrase². This can be explained within the Minimalist framework by Case (Chomsky, 2000), which suggests that CS formation involves assigning Case to the embedded nominal. It is assumed that the process that creates the heads of CS produces a genitive Case feature. If the Case feature of the embedded nominal is not valued, it remains syntactically active. Shlonsky (2004) suggests that the main difference between simple nouns and construct states is that the latter includes a complement DP with the N^0 . He assumes that the head noun in a construct state assigns the genitive Case. As a result, the complement of N cannot move away from the head, and a construct state is formed by merging N and its complement. In addition, Shlonsky argues that the phonological properties of a construct state and the requirement for linear adjacency between the noun and its complement are due to the assignment of the genitive case³. Furthermore, this paper shows that DS in SA provides empirical evidence in favor of the Case-marker analysis of CS. That is, it is not possible for Prepositional Phrases (PPs) headed by prepositions such as *li* 'to' to be linked to the head noun by the CS. Consider the following example:

- (11) * qlam-u li-Ali-in
 Pen-NOM to-Ali-GEN.NUN
 'A pen of Ali'

Given that, and like Miller and Sag's (1997) proposal that clitics are affixes realizing some kinds of arguments in the sentences, I argue that the nunations in SA are affixes realizing an otherwise unexpressed argument. More precisely, they are not just the result of a superficial affixation process. They are such arguments, just like the same element in the genitive position in CSs. There is no syntactic feature that distinguishes the nunation *-n* from an ordinary phrase. I am concerned with a kind of affix, but they look alike because they have the same distribution. Consider the following examples:

- (12) a. qlam-u Ali-in
 Pen-NOM Ali-GEN.NUN
 'Ali's pen'
- b. qlam-u-n
 Pen-NOM-NUN
 'A pen'

Furthermore, SCs in SA do not allow gaps. Consider:

- (13) * jahadtu qalam-a —
 saw.1SM pen-ACC gap
 'I saw a pen'

² Fassi Fehri's (2012) argument is based on Larson & Yamakido (2008) on Persian and Holmberg & Odden (2004) on Hawrami.

³ Shlonsky (2004) assumes that the absence of a definite article to the left of the construct noun and the spread of definiteness features follow from how the syntax handles the construct state NP. However, some studies such as (Almansour (2012) and Alotaibi (2015) argue that the best approach to treat CS in SA is the Phase theory of Chomsky (2008). However, the analysis of this case lies beyond the scope of this paper.

The possessor position cannot be empty, it must be filled by either an NP or a nunation. A central fact about nunations is that they appear in the same positions as embedded genitive NPs. Although nunation may be considered a word-level inflectional affix, it attaches to the head within the SCs, both nunation and the embedded genitive NP cannot be separated from the head by any other element. It might be crucial to the discussion, in contrast to the nunation in Arabic, the definite article (*al-*) cannot be in complementary distribution with embedded genitive NP. On the other hand, the fact that nunation and the embedded genitive NP cannot be simultaneously attached to the same host suggests that they must be realized in the same slot. A similar view has been defended by Samvelian (2012). Another fact supports this claim, let us consider the following instance:

- (14) **ʃaribtu al-hali:b-an al-baqarat-i*
 drank-1SG DEF-milk-ACC-NUN DEF-cow-GEN
 "I drank the cow's milk"

The nunation is in the genitive Case, nevertheless, it cannot be followed by the embedded genitive NP. The ungrammaticality of this example cannot be accounted for based on the assumption that embedded genitive NP, *al-baqarat-i* 'the-cow, gets assigned structural genitive Case by the head noun in SCs (cf. Shlonsky, 2004). If the case assigner responsible for assigning the Case to the embedded NP is located above the nunation, then the intervention of the nunation affix would create a Defective Intervention Effect, that would block the assignment of the Case to the embedded NP. Strictly speaking, the Case feature of the head noun in SCs is unvalued and must be checked before Spell-Out. Thus, it searches for the closest goal with an undeleted unvalued Case feature in its c-command domain. In this case, it seems plausible to assume that the nunation affix functions as the goal.

6. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that the nunation suffix in Arabic is in complementary distribution with the embedded genitive NP. Thus, I argue that the nunation affix in Arabic is best treated as a complement in a head-complement pattern, attaching to a head noun, and is not a result of a superficial affixation process.

Although this analysis differs significantly from the one proposed by Jarrah and Zibin (2016), their view faces a few problems. It is not possible to have both the nunation suffix and the definite article together, either one of them is possible. Moreover, the assumption that the nunation suffix occupies the same position would face at least one problem. In syntax, they should occupy different positions because the definite article is a prefix and nunation is a suffix. Furthermore, according to their approach, DPs can optionally have an overt D^0 or empty D^0 , thus, when D^0 is overt, it is either filled by the definite article or the suffix nunation, like cases of definite DPs or indefinite DPs. On the other hand, if D^0 is empty, the D^0 head will not be filled, like in cases of indefinite DPs or proper nouns. Therefore, the paper suggests that the more natural and grammatical assumption is to assume that construct states in Arabic are NPs, and not DPs, that contain nunation suffixes.

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