
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Case Morphology in Arabic: A Comparative Study Across Dialects

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ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the vitality or potential endangerment of Arabic dialects by analyzing the patterns of language use in different regions where Arabic is spoken. Language is inherently linked to its speakers, and the ways in which people utilize their language can provide valuable insights into the health and survival of their native dialects. This study particularly focuses on two specific Arabic dialects: the Saudi dialect spoken in the southern region of Saudi Arabia, and the Sudanese dialect of Khartoum. By examining these dialects, the research aims to explore the key features of case endings as well as the variations in vocabulary (lexical variations) that exist within and between these dialects. This comparison will help shed light on how regional factors influence the development and preservation of linguistic features in Arabic.

KEYWORDS

Arabic, Dialectal Variation, Case Markers, Lexical Variation

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1. Introduction:

Arabic is one of the world's oldest and most widely spoken languages, with deep historical, cultural, and religious significance. As the official language of 22 countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Arabic is not only a means of communication but also a bridge connecting diverse cultures, traditions, and ideologies. With over 380 million native speakers, Arabic ranks as the fifth most spoken language globally, and its influence extends far beyond its native regions, shaping the Islamic world and international discourse (Ethnologue; UNESCO).

Arabic is a member of the Semitic language family, which also includes languages such as Hebrew and Amharic. Its roots can be traced back to ancient inscriptions found in the Arabian Peninsula, and it has undergone significant evolution over millennia. The classical form of Arabic, known as Classical Arabic (CA), is the language of the Qur'an, Islam's holy book, and continues to be used in religious contexts and formal speech across the Arab world (Mackenzie, 1990).

However, what makes Arabic particularly fascinating is the complexity and diversity of its dialects. Spoken Arabic varies widely across regions, with each country, and even each city or village, often possessing its own distinct version of the language. These regional dialects, referred to as colloquial Arabic, have developed over time due to historical, geographical, and social influences. While all dialects share a common root in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)—the contemporary form of the language used in formal writing, news, and media—the spoken dialects can differ significantly in terms of phonology, grammar, syntax, and vocabulary (Versteegh, 2001).

The Arabic dialectal continuum stretches from the dialects of the Maghreb (Northwest Africa), such as Moroccan and Algerian Arabic, to the dialects of the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine), and down to the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula dialects, including Saudi Arabic. The divergence among these dialects is so pronounced that speakers of one dialect may find it difficult to understand speakers of a dialect from another region, leading to mutual unintelligibility. Despite this, all Arabic dialects share

certain core features, including the use of root-based morphology, but they also exhibit unique characteristics influenced by local languages and historical factors (Owens, 2006).

For example, the Saudi dialect of the southern region of Saudi Arabia has a unique phonological system, influenced by both the local environment and interactions with Bedouin tribes, while the Sudanese dialect of Khartoum has incorporated elements from the Nubian languages, due to Sudan's rich history of cultural exchange and migration (Al-Harbi, 2006; Lück, 2017). These regional variations make Arabic dialectology a particularly rich field of study, revealing not just linguistic features but also social and cultural practices that define each group of speakers.

This study will focus on the analysis of specific features within the case endings and lexical variations found in Saudi and Sudanese Arabic, providing insight into the dynamic and evolving nature of these dialects. By examining the regional differences in case morphology and vocabulary, this research aims to contribute to our understanding of how Arabic dialects interact with each other and the factors that influence their development and preservation.

2. Method:

The data for the study was collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data for this study were collected through field observations and interactions with language consultants. To investigate dialectal variation, a questionnaire containing a list of sentences was extensively used. This study compares two dialects: the Saudi dialect from the southern region of Saudi Arabia and the Sudanese dialect spoken in Khartoum, Sudan. The secondary source consists of various agencies, books, newspaper clippings etc. The technique used to collect the data through primary sources will be mainly observations –both candid and participation. The methodology adopted in this research work was modelled upon modern research methodologies. Starting with data collection, analysis has used modern quantification tools and techniques.

3. Analysis:

Case: Case is a grammatical category determined by the syntactic or semantic function of a noun or pronoun. Like other languages, in Arabic also, semantic relation between a noun phrase or subject and a predicate is expressed by the grammatical category of case in Arabic of dialects can be:

3.1 Nominative:

In Arabic, the nominative case is used to identify the subject of a sentence and the predicate in nominal (non-verbal) constructions, among other functions. Because Arabic is an inflected language, these grammatical roles are indicated by changes in word endings or diacritical marks, especially in fully vowelized texts like Classical Arabic or formal writing. The nominative case generally marks the subject of a verb or the predicate noun or predicate adjective which is either a noun or a pronoun. In Arabic, the marker for nominative is /Ø/. Examples-

Saudi	<i>jaskatul</i>	<i>tip^hil</i>
English	falls down-pr	child-NOM
Sudanese	<i>jaskatul</i>	<i>tip^hil</i>
English	falls down-pr	child-NOM
Gloss	The child falls down.'	

Saudi	<i>lan</i>	<i>jati:</i>	<i>ahmad</i>	<i>gadan</i>
English	be-FUT	come-FUT	Ahmad-NOM	tomorrow
Sudanese	<i>ahmad</i>	<i>lan</i>	<i>jafi:</i>	<i>gadan</i>
English	Ahmad-NOM	be-FUT	come-FUT	tomorrow
Gloss	Ahmad will not come tomorrow.'			

Saudi	<i>idzlis</i>	<i>bainul</i>	<i>avla:d</i>	
English	sit	amongst	children-NOM	
Sudanese	<i>k^huz</i>	<i>maka:na</i>	<i>bainul</i>	<i>avla:d</i>
English	take-PR	seat	amongst	children-NOM

Gloss	Take your seat amongst the boys.'
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Saudi	<i>katul</i>	<i>haku:ma</i>	<i>ma:lan</i>	<i>lil</i>	<i>p^hukara:</i>
English	give-PR	government-NOM	money	to	poor-DAT
Sudanese	<i>tanhal</i>	<i>haku:ma</i>	<i>alamva:l</i>	<i>lil</i>	<i>p^hukara:</i>
English	give-PR	government-NOM	money	to	poor-DAT
Gloss	'The Government gives money to poor'				

3.2 Ergative:

The ergative is used in ergative-absolutive languages (like Basque or Georgian), where the subject of a transitive verb is marked differently from the subject of an intransitive verb. The ergative case is the grammatical case of the noun that identifies the subject of a transitive verb in ergative-absolutive languages. This is not the case in Arabic. So, while Arabic has grammatical case and subject-object distinctions, it aligns with languages like Latin or Russian in being nominative-accusative, not ergative-absolutive. When we see the comparison between Saudi and Sudanese dialects, there is variation in word order.

Saudi	<i>akula:</i>	<i>ahmad</i>	<i>ma:dzo:</i>
English	<i>eat-PST</i>	ahmad -ERG	<i>mango</i>
Sudanese	<i>akula:</i>	<i>ahmad</i>	<i>ma:dzo:</i>
English	<i>eat-PST</i>	ahmad -ERG	<i>mango</i>
Gloss	'Ahmad ate the mango.'		

Saudi	<i>ka:mul avla:d</i>	<i>bi imsa:k</i>	<i>alsamak</i>
English	children-ERG	catch-PST	fish
Sudanese	<i>asta:d</i>	<i>alatp^ha:l</i>	<i>alsamak</i>
English	catch-PST	children-ERG	fish
Gloss	'The children caught the fish.'		

Saudi	<i>ata:</i>	<i>ahmad</i>	<i>alkita:b</i>	<i>ila:</i>	<i>ibrahim:</i>
English	give-PST	Ahmad-ERG	book	to	Ibrahim-dat
Sudanese	<i>ata:</i>	<i>ahmad</i>	<i>alkita:b</i>	<i>ila:</i>	<i>ibrahim:</i>
English	give-PST	Ahmad-ERG	book	to	Ibrahim-dat
Gloss	'Ahmad gave the book to Ibrahim.'				

Saudi	<i>rait-ul</i>	<i>māfu:r</i>
English	I-ERG see-PST	bird-ACC
Sudanese	<i>rai-nu</i>	<i>alta:jir</i>
English	I-ERG see-PST	bird-ACC
Gloss	'I saw the bird.'	

3.3 Genitive:

Genitive case is a case in which the referent of the marked noun is the possessor of the referent of another noun. This case expresses the meaning of belonging to or possession of something by the subject. The first noun is the possessed item, and the second noun is the possessor, which takes the genitive case. Here in both the dialects, no such variation is found. Examples are:

Saudi	<i>hazi</i>	<i>hi:</i>	<i>biju:ti</i>
English	these	my-GEN	house
Sudanese	<i>hazi</i>	<i>hi:</i>	<i>manazil</i>
English	these	my-GEN	house
Gloss	'These are my houses.'		

Saudi	<i>tilka</i>	<i>huva</i>	<i>siki:n</i>
English	this	his-GEN	knife
Sudanese	<i>haza:</i>	<i>huva</i>	<i>siki:n</i>
English	this	his-GEN	knife
Gloss	'This is his knife.'		

Saudi	<i>haza:</i>	<i>hadi:k</i>	<i>tak</i>
English	this	garden	your-GEN
Sudanese	<i>haza:</i>	<i>hadi:k</i>	<i>tak</i>
English	this	garden	your-GEN
Gloss	'This is my garden'		

3.4 Accusative:

Accusative case is the case in nominative-accusative languages that marks certain syntactic functions, usually direct objects. The accusative case in Arabic is used for direct objects, adverbs, and objects of specific prepositions. In both the dialects, the Accusative case is given and are marked by /a:/:

Saudi	<i>rait-ul</i>	<i>məfu:ra:</i>
English	I-ERG see-PST	bird-ACC
Sudanese	<i>rai-nu</i>	<i>alta:jira:</i>
English	I-ERG see-PST	bird-ACC
Gloss	'I saw the bird.'	

Saudi	<i>nehnu</i>	<i>nara:</i>	<i>alta:jira</i>
English	I-erg	see-pst	bird-acc
Sudanese	<i>nehnu</i>	<i>nara:</i>	<i>alta:jira:</i>
English	I-erg	see-pst	bird-acc
Gloss	'We are seeing the bird.'		

Saudi	<i>asta:d</i>	<i>alsaja:d</i>	<i>algaza:la:</i>
English	catch-PST	hunter-ERG	deer-ACC
Sudanese	<i>asta:d</i>	<i>alsaja:d</i>	<i>algaza:la</i>
English	catch-PST	hunter-ERG	deer-ACC
Gloss	'The hunter caught the deer.'		

Saudi	<i>nehnu</i>	<i>taglabna</i>	<i>alabka:ra:</i>
English	We	beat-PR	cow-ACC
Sudanese	<i>lakad</i>	<i>zarabna</i>	<i>alabka:r:</i>
English	we	beat-PR	cow-ACC
Gloss	'We beat the cows.'		

3.5 Dative:

The dative case designates the indirect object of a transitive verb. Nouns having the role of recipient (as of things given), beneficiary of an action, or possessor of an item are datives. The context plays a crucial factor in differentiating between dative and accusative.

In Arabic, there is no dedicated "dative case" like in some other languages (e.g., German, Latin, or Russian). However, dative functions — typically indicating the indirect object (i.e., the recipient of an action) — are still expressed, just in different ways. Examples in both the dialects are mentioned below and some lexical variation has been seen at dative level such as in Saudi dialect [house] is /*baiti*:/ and in Sudanese dialect [house] is /*manzili*:/ and in both the dialects case marker /*i*:/ is used

Saudi	<i>izhab</i>	<i>ila</i> :	<i>baiti</i> :
English	go-PR	my	house-DAT
Sudanese	<i>izhab</i>	<i>ila</i> :	<i>manzili</i> :
English	go-PR	my	house-DAT
Gloss	'Go to my house.'		

Saudi	<i>ata</i> :	<i>ahmad</i>	<i>alkita:b</i>	<i>ila</i> :	<i>ibrahim</i>
English	give-PST	Ahmad-ERG	book	to	Ibrahim-dat
Sudanese	<i>ata</i> :	<i>ahmad</i>	<i>alkita:b</i>	<i>ila</i> :	<i>ibrahim</i>
English	give-PST	Ahmad-ERG	book	to	Ibrahim-dat
Gloss	'Ahmad gave the book to Ibrahim.'				

Saudi	<i>jedzib-an</i>	<i>nazhab</i>	<i>ila</i> :	<i>p^hilim</i>
English	we	go-FUT	to	film-DAT
Sudanese	<i>jedzib-an</i>	<i>nazhab</i>	<i>ila</i> :	<i>p^hilim</i>
English	we	go-FUT	to	film-DAT
Gloss	'We shall go to see the film.'			

3.6 Instrumental:

This case is used to denote instrument with which the action is performed. It is a case indicating that the referent of the noun. In Arabic, there is no formal "instrumental case" as found in languages of the world. However, instrumental meaning is, expressing "by means of", "using", or "with" something is still conveyed in Arabic using specific prepositions and sentence structures. Examples in both the dialects are mentioned below and case marker in Saudi dialect is /*i*:/, while as in Sudanese dialect, case markers are /*i*:/ and /*a:n*/ are used.

Saudi	<i>aktubu</i>	<i>bi</i>	<i>kalami</i> :
English	write-PR	with	pen-INSTR
Sudanese	<i>aktubu</i>	<i>bi</i>	<i>kalami</i> :
English	write-PR	with	pen-INSTR
Gloss	'Write with my pen.'		

Saudi	<i>damarat^han</i>	<i>alna:r</i>	<i>alga:b</i>
English	destroy-PST	fire-INSTR	forest
Sudanese	<i>alga:bata</i>	<i>maradt^han</i>	<i>jinaran</i>
English	forest	destroy-PST	fire-INSTR
Gloss	'The forest is destroyed by fire.'		

Saudi	<i>tam</i>	<i>kas</i>	<i>alfe:r</i>	<i>bilmakas</i>
English	cut	with	hair	scissor-INSTR
Sudanese	<i>jatim</i>	<i>kas</i>	<i>alfe:r</i>	<i>bilmikas</i>
English	cut	with	hair	scissor-INSTR

Gloss	'The hair is cut with scissors.'
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3.7 Ablative:

Ablative case is a case that expresses movement of the subject or the object from one place to another either at the spatial plane or at the temporal plane is expressed by the ablative case. Arabic does not have a formal "ablative case", as seen in Latin, Turkish, or Sanskrit. However, Arabic does express ablative functions (like separation, movement away from something, cause, or origin) using prepositions. Examples in both the dialects are mentioned below and /a:/ case marker is commonly used in both the dialects.

Saudi	<i>tetatul</i>	<i>amta:r</i>	<i>man</i>	<i>fe:r</i>	<i>julai</i>
English	start	rain	from	month	july-ABL
Sudanese	<i>jabda</i>	<i>alamta:r</i>	<i>man</i>	<i>fe:r</i>	<i>julai</i>
English	start	rain	from	month	july-ABL
Gloss	'Rain starts from the month of July.'				

Saudi	<i>katap^hal</i>	<i>alavla:d</i>	<i>alp^hakihan</i>	<i>minal</i>	<i>fadzira:</i>
English	pluck-PST	child-ERG	fruit	from	tree-ABL
Sudanese	<i>kata:</i>	<i>altip^hlun</i>	<i>alp^hakihatun</i>	<i>minal</i>	<i>fadzira:</i>
English	pluck-PST	child-ERG	fruit	from	tree-ABL
Gloss	'The child plucked the fruit from the tree.'				

Saudi	<i>iftara</i>	<i>ahmad</i>	<i>alta:vla</i>	<i>minal</i>	<i>su:k</i>
English	buy-PST	ahmad	table	from	market-ABL
Sudanese	<i>iftara</i>	<i>ahmad</i>	<i>alta:vla</i>	<i>minal</i>	<i>su:k</i>
English	buy-PST	ahmad	table	from	market-ABL
Gloss	'Ahmad bought the table from the market.'				

Saudi	<i>sahakatul</i>	<i>alavra:k</i>	<i>minal</i>	<i>fadzira:</i>
English	fell-PST	leaves	from	tree-ABL
Sudanese	<i>taskat</i>	<i>alavra:k</i>	<i>minal</i>	<i>fadzira:</i>
English	fell-PST	leaves	from	tree-ABL
Gloss	'The leaves fall from the tree.'			

3.8 Locative:

Locative case is a case that expresses location at the referent of the noun it marks. The location of the subject or object is expressed by the locative case marker. Arabic, like with the dative, ablative, or instrumental cases, does not have a separate "locative case". Instead, it expresses locative meaning—that is, location, place, and spatial relationships—through a system of prepositions and contextual structure, with the noun following the preposition marked in the genitive case. Examples in both the dialects are mentioned below and same case marker /i:/ is in common use.

Saudi	<i>ana</i>	<i>p^hi:</i>	<i>be:ti:</i>
English	I-nom	be-PR	house-LOC
Sudanese	<i>ana</i>	<i>p^hi:</i>	<i>manzili:</i>
English	I-nom	be-PR	house-LOC
Gloss	'I am in my house.'		

Saudi	<i>alkita:b</i>	<i>alal</i>	<i>ta:vila</i>
English	book-NOM	on	table-LOC
Sudanese	<i>alkita:b</i>	<i>alal</i>	<i>ta:vila</i>
English	book-NOM	on	table-LOC
Gloss	'The book is on the table.'		

Saudi	<i>albabaga</i>	<i>alal</i>	<i>fadzara:</i>
English	parrot-NOM	on	tree-LOC
Sudanese	<i>albabaga</i>	<i>alal</i>	<i>fadzara:</i>
English	parrot-NOM	on	tree-LOC
Gloss	'The parrot is on the tree.'		

Saudi	<i>alhaivana:t</i>	<i>p^hil</i>	<i>hap^hil</i>
English	animals-NOM	in	field-LOC
Sudanese	<i>alhaivana:t</i>	<i>p^hil</i>	<i>hap^hil</i>
English	animals-NOM	in	field-LOC
Gloss	'The book is on the table.'		

Conclusion:

The study investigated the vitality of Arabic dialects through a comparative analysis of case endings and lexical variations between the Saudi and Sudanese dialects. The focus was on understanding how these dialects retain or evolve linguistic features, particularly case morphology, in different regional contexts.

This research significantly contributes to understanding the variation in Arabic dialects, particularly in terms of case morphology and vocabulary. It highlights how different regional dialects have preserved or adapted classical features of Arabic, showing that the dialects remain vibrant but also evolve over time. By focusing on the Saudi and Sudanese dialects, the study provides concrete examples of how language is shaped by cultural and geographical factors and how even within the Arabic-speaking world, there is a rich diversity of linguistic expression. The nominative case is marked similarly in both dialects, with minimal variation. The accusative case is marked by /a:/ in both dialects, while the genitive case shows no significant variation between them. Instrumental and Ablative cases are expressed through prepositions rather than dedicated case markers, showing similar structures in both dialects.

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