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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The structure of *ʔillaa* as a response particle in Najdi Arabic: a lexical account

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|ABSTRACT
This paper examines a specialized use of the particle *ʔillaa* in Najdi Arabic (NA), where it functions as a clause-initial response particle whose use is restricted only to negative contexts. By comparing it with its counterpart particle *balaa* in Classical Arabic, the paper identifies the structural patterns in which *ʔillaa* occurs and shows that its primary linguistic role is to deny or negate a negative assumption. In addition to describing and classifying the constructions of *ʔillaa*, the paper attempts to offer a theoretical lexical account of *ʔillaa* using the framework of Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG). It argues that *ʔillaa* in NA has shifted via the process of grammaticalization from an exceptional marker to this specific use. It also proposes that *ʔillaa* here can be analyzed as a clausal particle that can occur alone as a complete independent clause (i.e., it does not have any categorial or semantic selectional properties).

| KEYWORDS

Najdi Arabic, *ʔillaa*, response particle, HPSG, lexical analysis.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Particles are distinct linguistic items or words that exist in all human languages. They are generally defined as minimal, invariable functional words that contribute to sentence meaning while lacking independent lexical content, functioning primarily in grammatical or discourse-related roles (Crystal, 2008, p. 352).

In Standard Arabic, *ʔillaa* (also written as *ʔilla*) is traditionally described as a particle of exception that expresses exclusion and commonly corresponds to the meaning 'except' (Lane, 1863). Within the broader context of Arabic varieties, particularly in Najdi Arabic (NA), *ʔillaa* can also function as a clause-initial response particle that cancels a preceding, somewhat pre-assumed negation and strongly affirms the opposite (i.e., confirms the truth of the proposition). This usage parallels the Classical Arabic (CA) particle *balaa*, which occurs in the Holy Qur'an as a marker of affirmation following negation (Abdelqader, 2020; Alshalawi, 2017; Shamikh, 2024). Although similar response particles are found across languages, such as French *si* (a counter-assertive 'yes') and German *doch* (a corrective 'yes') (Schmerse et al., 2014; Pasquereau, 2020), the NA response particle *ʔillaa* remains understudied, and this research gap motivates the present investigation. Therefore, the current paper aims to study this idiosyncratic use of *ʔillaa* in NA. Specifically, it seeks to describe the constructions in which *ʔillaa* occurs, compare its functions with those of *balaa* in CA, and shortly provide a formal account of *ʔillaa* within the framework of Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG).

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical background of Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG). Section 3 and its subsections provide a comparison between *ʔillaa* in Najdi Arabic and *balaa* in Classical Arabic. Section 4 examines the structural properties of *ʔillaa* in 4.1 and presents a theoretical analysis of the response particle *ʔillaa* in Najdi Arabic within the framework of HPSG in 4.2. Section 5 concludes this paper.

2. Theoretical Background

This paper uses Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG) as its theoretical framework. HPSG was developed by Pollard and Sag in the 1980s. It is a declarative, monostratal version of Generative Grammar that develops formal analyses through a system of types, features, and constraints on lexical-sign types (Abeillé & Borsley, 2021). It models linguistic objects using typed feature structures and represents their phonological, syntactic, and semantic information. Unlike transformational approaches such as Government and Binding or Minimalism, HPSG is surface-oriented and non-transformational (Müller & Machicao y Priemer, 2019). In addition, HPSG classifies signs within a hierarchically organized network of types, with constraints inherited by subtypes. This formally explicit and highly restrictive architecture operates without derivational machinery and assumes a single level of syntactic representation (Levine & Green, 1999). To illustrate how HPSG represents linguistic (i.e., phonological, syntactic, and semantic) information or properties of a given item within a single typed feature structure, consider the lexical entry for the NA verb *ħaṭ* 'put' shown in (1).

(1)

$$\begin{bmatrix} word \\ \text{PHON } \langle \text{ħaṭ} \rangle \\ \text{SYNSEM|LOCAL} \begin{bmatrix} local \\ \text{CATEGORY} \begin{bmatrix} category \\ \text{HEAD} \begin{bmatrix} verb \\ \text{AUX} - \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{VALENCE} \begin{bmatrix} \text{SUBJ } \langle NP_{\boxed{1}} \rangle \\ \text{COMPS } \langle NP_{\boxed{2}}, PP_{\boxed{3}} \rangle \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{CONTENT} \begin{bmatrix} \text{ħaṭ 'put'} - relation \\ \text{PUTTER} \quad \boxed{1} \\ \text{THING} - \text{PUT} \quad \boxed{2} \\ \text{DESTINATION} \quad \boxed{3} \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{ARG} - \text{ST} \langle [1]\text{NP}, [2]\text{NP}, [3]\text{PP} \rangle \end{bmatrix}$$

As shown in (1), which is slightly adapted from Levine and Meurers (2006), the lexical entry represents the verb *ħaṭ* 'put' categorized as a word and exhibits a set of features and their structural values. The feature PHON specifies the phonological form of this verb. The syntactic and semantic attributes are specified in the feature SYNSEM. Within SYNSEM, the local value is divided into two components: category, which specifies syntactic properties, and content, which represents semantic information. The head feature identifies the syntactic category of a lexical entry. For *ħaṭ*, the head feature specifies it as a verb and assigns it the value AUX–, which means it functions as a lexical verb, not an auxiliary. The valence feature specifies the head's requirements. This typically includes the subject and the complements that the verb *ħaṭ* requires. In HPSG, boxed numbers such as [1], [2], and [3] are used to show token identity. The feature ARG-ST (argument structure) specifies the arguments associated with the verb. The ARG-ST indicates that *put* takes an NP subject and two complements.

Building on this foundation, Ginzburg and Sag (2000) emphasize the role of lexical types and their type-specific constraints. They argue that an HPSG grammar specifies an inventory of lexical classes, governed by phonological, syntactic, and semantic restrictions. Lexical descriptions are formulated as AVMs that capture the organization of words, including their argument-selection properties. Moreover, these lexical constraints work together with phrasal constructions through the organization of SYNSEM and local information, which helps maintain locality in subcategorization and argument realization (Ginzburg & Sag, 2000).

3. *ʔillaa* in NA and *balaa* in Classical Arabic:

3.1 Overview

In CA, the particle *balaa* is described in the holy Qur'an and traditional Arabic grammar as a response particle (*ħarf jawaab*) used exclusively after negative questions or negative statements (Abdelqader, 2020; Shalabi, 2018; Shamikh, 2024). Its function is to provide an affirmative answer in contexts shaped by negation. Unlike *yes* (*naʃam*), which may affirm both positive and negative utterances, *balaa* is restricted to negated contexts and is used to assert the truth of the proposition that the negative form preceding it denies (Shalabi, 2018). Studies show that *balaa* appears twenty-two times across sixteen Surahs (i.e., chapters) in the Holy Qur'an, and is frequently used in contexts involving denial, disputation, or rhetorical interrogation (Abdelqader, 2020;

AlShalawi, 2017). In many occurrences in the Holy Qur'an, *balaa* stands in place of a full clause, with the intended affirmative meaning inferred from the structure of the preceding negative sentence (Shalabi, 2018).

In NA, the particle *ʔillaa* shows closely parallel behavior. Beyond its 'typical' function as an exclusion operator in Standard Arabic and other Arabic varieties including NA, *ʔillaa* in NA has shifted to a distinct usage as a clause-initial response particle used only after negation. In this role, it affirms the positive truth of the proposition in contexts where a negative assumption is present, whether expressed through negators such as *maa*, *mub, mu, or manib*. The following subsections illustrate the distribution and use of *ʔillaa* across four types of contexts. These four are actually the types of contexts where the CA particle *balaa* occurs (AlShalawi, 2017).

3.2 Explicit Negative Interrogatives

Explicit negative interrogatives are questions formed with an explicit negative marker and used when the speaker anticipates an affirmative reply that reverses the negative assumption. Although the question is structurally negative, it invites the respondent to affirm the positive state of affairs.

(2) NA

a. *ma tabi turuuħ maʃ-na?*
NEG want.2SG.M go.2SG.M with-us?
'Don't you want to go with us?'
ʔillaa. /ʔillaa, abi ʔruuħ maʃ-kum[1]
NEG.AFF[2], want.1SG go.1SG with-you
'Yes, I want to go with you.'

b. *ma ɣsalat aṣ-ṣħuun?*
NEG wash.3.SG.F DEF-dishes?
'Didn't she wash the dishes?'
ʔillaa. /ʔillaa, ɣasalt-hum
NEG.AFF, wash.1SG-3PL
'Yes, she washed them.'

c. *maa tagdar tiji?*
NEG can.2SG come.2SG.M?
'Can't you come?'
ʔillaa. /ʔillaa, ʔagdar ʔaji
NEG.AFF, can.1.SG come.1.SG
'Yes, I can come.'

(3) CA

a. *ʔawa-lam tuʔmin?*
Q-and-NEG.PST believe.2SG.M?
'[Allah] said, have you not believed?'
qaala balaa
said.3SG NEG.AFF
'He said, yes, but [I ask].'
(Al-Baqarah 2:260)[3]

b. *ʔalaa yakfiyakum ʔan yumidda-kum Rabbu-kum...? balaa*
Q-NEG.FUT suffice.3SG that reinforce.3SG-you lord-your.PL ...? NEG.AFF
'Is it not sufficient for you that your Lord should reinforce you?' 'yes, it is.'
(Al-'Imran 3:124-125)

[1] Note that the answer to this question, which applies to all the following example, can be *ʔillaa* alone or (as indicated by /) *ʔillaa* plus a sentence emphasizing the affirmative response.

[2] NEG.AFF is used here in the glossing to indicate that *ʔillaaa*, as well as *balaa* in CA, is a negative-polarity response particle used to affirm a proposition within a negative context.

[3] The translation of the Holy Qur'an verses have been checked and taken from MyIslam's Qur'an sources.

3.3 Rhetorical Reproachful Negative Interrogatives

These represent questions used in a negative construction, but they do not seek information. Instead, they convey disapproval, blame, or even surprise. Here, the speaker treats the negated proposition as unreasonable or unexpected, prompting the interlocutor to affirm the positive state of affairs instead. In this context, *ʔillaa* in NA and *balaa* in CA assert the factual reality that the rhetorical interrogative implicitly challenges.

(4) NA

a. *maa yasmuʃ-uun kalaam-ik?*
NEG listen-3PL speech-your.SG?
'Don't they listen to you?'
ʔillaa. /ʔillaa, yasmuʃ-uun kalaam-ii
NEG.AFF, listen-3.PL speech-my
'Yes, they listen to my speech.'

b. *maa tsaaʃid abuu-k?*
NEG help.2.SG.M father-your.SG.M?
'Don't you help your father?'
ʔillaa. /ʔillaa, asaaʃid abuu-y
NEG.AFF, help.1SG father-my
'Yes, I help my father.'

c. *maatʃarf tuguul laa?*
NEG know.2SG say.2SG no?
'Don't you know how to say no?'
ʔillaa. /ʔillaa, ʔaʃarf
NEG.AFF, know.1SG
'Yes, I know.'

(5) CA

a. *ʔam yaħsab-uuna annaa laa nasmaʃu sirra-hum?*
or think-3PL that NEG hear.1PL secret-their.PL?
'Or do they think that We hear not their secrets?'
balaa
NEG.AFF
'Yes, [We do].'
(Az-Zukhruf 43:80)

b. *ʔayaħsabu l-ʔinsaan-u ʔan lan najmaʃa ʃiẓaam-ah?*
Q-think.3SG DEF-human-NOM that NEG.FUT gather.1PL bones-his.SG?
'Does man think that We will not assemble his bones?'
balaa
NEG.AFF
'Yes. [We are] Able.'
(Al-Qiyaamah 75:3–4)

c. *ʔawa-laisa l-laðii khalaqa as-samaawaati wa l-arḍ-a biqaadir-in...?*
Q-and-NEG REL.3SG create.PST.3SG DEF-heavens.ACC and DEF-earth-ACC able-GEN?
'Is not He who created the heavens and the earth Able to?'
balaa
NEG.AFF
'Yes, [it is so].'
(YaaSin 36:81)

3.4 Negative Declarative Interrogatives

Here, the speaker presents a negative statement while implicitly inviting the respondent to reply with an affirmation that negates the negative claim. In both NA and CA, *ʔillaa* and *balaa* are used to express this affirmative response.

(6) NA

a. *maa* *fiih* *wagt?*
NEG there.is time
'There is no time.'
ʔillaa. /ʔillaa, fiih
NEG.AFF, there.is
'Yes, there is (time).'

b. *mub* *ziin* *al-waḍʕ?*
NEG good DEF-situation
'The situation isn't good.'
ʔillaa. /ʔillaa, zein
NEG.AFF good
'Yes, it is good.'

c. *salma* *mu* *naaymah?*
salma NEG sleeping.SG.F
'Salma is not sleeping.'
ʔillaa. /ʔillaa naaymah
NEG.AFF, sleeping.SG.F
'Yes, she is sleeping.'

(7) CA

a. *wa-qaala* *l-laðiina* *kafar-uu* *laa* *taʔtiinaa* *as-Saaʕah*
and-said.3SG REL.3PL disbelieved-3PL NEG come.3SG DEF-hour
'But those who disbelieve say: the Hour (Day of Judgment) will not come to us.'
qul *balaa*
say NEG.AFF
'Say, Yes, by my Lord, it will surely come to you.'
(Saba 34:3)

b. *zaʕama* *l-laðiina* *kafaruu* *ʔan* *lan* *yubʕaθ-uu*
claimed.3SG REL.3PL disbelieved.3PL that NEG.FUT be.resurrected-3PL
'Those who disbelieve have claimed that they will never be resurrected.'
qul *balaa.*
say NEG.AFF
'Say, Yes, by my Lord, you will surely be resurrected.'
(At-Taghabun 64:7)

c. *laa* *yabʕaθu* *Allaah-u* *manyamuut;* *balaa….*
NEG resurrect.3SG God-NOM REL die.3SG NEG.AFF
'Allah will not resurrect one who dies. But yes.'
(An-Nahl 16:38)

3.5 Affirmative-Rhetorical Interrogatives

Affirmative-rhetorical negative interrogatives are questions framed with a negative particle but used rhetorically to reinforce a shared or obvious truth. The speaker does not seek information; rather, the question highlights a fact presumed to be known by both parties. Here, the response particles *ʔillaa* and *balaa* are used to strongly affirm this presupposed truth.

(8) NA

a. *manib* *ṣaadig?*
NEG.1.SG honest?
'Am I not honest?'
ʔillaa, / ʔillaa, ṣaadig
NEG.AFF, honest.2.SG.M
'Yes, you are honest.'

b. *maa* *raaħtgaddim* *al-ħafil?*
NEG FUT present.2.SG.M DEF-event?
'Won't you present the event?'
ʔillaa. /ʔillaa, ba-gaddim

NEG.AFF, FUT-present.1SG
'Yes, I will present.'

c. *maa ʕindu-kum waajib?*
NEG have-you.PL homework
'Don't you have homework?'
ʔillaa, /ʔillaa, ʕind-naa waajib
NEG.AFF have-1PL homework
'Yes, we have homework.'

(9) CA

a. *ʔalastu bi-Rabbi-kum?*
Q-NEG.1SG as-Lord-your.PL?
'Am I not your Lord?'
qaal-uu balaa
said-3PL NEG.AFF
'They said: Yes, we have testified.'
(Al-A'raf 7:172)

b. *ʔalam yaʔti-kum naðiir?*
Q-NEG.PST come-2PL warner?
'Did there not come to you a warner?'
qaal-uu balaa
said-3PL NEG.AFF
'They will say, Yes, a warner had come to us.'
(Al-Mulk 67:9)

c. *ʔalam yaʔti-kum Rusul-un...?*
Q-NEG.PST come-2PL messengers-NOM?
'Did there not come to you messengers?'
qaal-uu balaa
said-3PL NEG.AFF
'They will say, yes.'
(Az-Zumar 39:71)

These types or uses show that *ʔillaa* functions as a special response particle in NA, operating within the same contextual domain as CA *balaa*. It can be interpreted as its functional counterpart, reflecting a phonological change or transformation of *balaa*.

4. Analysis

4.1 The structural properties of ʔillaa as a response particle

The particle *ʔillaa* in NA exhibits a set of structural, semantic, and pragmatic properties that define its specialized function in response particles. First, *ʔillaa* is licensed only in contexts governed by negation. It appears exclusively after negative interrogatives, and its occurrence is likewise restricted to negated constructions. Second, *ʔillaa* appears in a fixed clause-initial position, obligatorily occurring at the beginning of the response. Third, *ʔillaa* does not require any complement. It may introduce a full affirmative clause or appear alone as a complete response. This optionality suggests that *ʔillaa* operates at a clausal level rather than an argument structure. Althawab (2022), following Ginzburg and Sag (2000), proposes the term 'clausal' to describe a similar 'independent' use of the negation marker *laa* in NA. This term is also used to describe expressions such as *yes* and *no* in English (Ginzburg & Sag, 2000). Such expressions can occur independently and convey a complete meaning. In this view, the NA *ʔillaa* aligns with this characterization when it functions at the level of an independent clause as a full stand-alone response particle rather than as a syntactic dependent within the argument structure as in (10).

(10) *maatagdar tiji?*
NEG can.2SG come.2SG.M?
'Can't you come?'
ʔillaa.
NEG.AFF,
'Yes, (I can come).'

4.2 HPSG Account

While Section 4.1 outlined the structural properties of *ʔillaa* at the clausal level, the present section develops a lexical analysis within the HPSG framework. The proposed analysis for *ʔillaa* is a slightly modified version of the one proposed by Althawab (2022) for the NA negation marker *laa* in its clausal sense. It can be argued that *ʔillaa* here needs to be viewed not as a phrasal element but as a lexical one whose syntactic and semantic features are encoded directly in its lexical entry. As illustrated in (10), clausal *ʔillaa* functions as an autonomous unit, independent of other lexical items or phrases. Syntactically, this indicates that it modifies no constituent, requiring its argument structure (ARG-ST) to be an empty list (*elist*). In line with Ginzburg and Sag (2000), clausal *ʔillaa* is categorized among a set of English words such as *yes*, *no*, and *right*, which function as stand-alone utterances with complete meaning. Consequently, clausal *ʔillaa* can be analyzed as schematized in (11).

(11)

$$\begin{bmatrix} \text{PHON} \langle illa \rangle \\ \text{SS|LOC} \begin{bmatrix} \text{CAT} \begin{bmatrix} \text{HEAD} \begin{bmatrix} particle \\ \text{IC} \quad + \\ \text{MOD} \; none \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{CONT} \begin{bmatrix} proposition \\ \text{NUCL} \; [neg.aff] \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{ARG} - \text{ST} \langle \quad \rangle \end{bmatrix}$$

The entry in (11) demonstrates that clausal *ʔillaa* behaves as a particle that modifies nothing, reflecting the lack of a MOD specification. It is also marked as an independent clause (IC +), which means it can function on its own as a complete utterance. Semantically, its nucleus is labeled [*neg.aff*], indicating that *ʔillaa*, in this use, is a negative-polarity response particle used to affirm a proposition within a negative context. Thus, its content is propositional. Finally, the empty argument structure (ARG-ST ⟨ ⟩) shows that clausal *ʔillaa* does not take a subject or any complement. Taken together, the HPSG analysis clearly distinguishes the Najdi clausal *ʔillaa* from the SA exclusion particle *ʔillaa*, which has different properties such as requiring a complement and conveying an exception.

5. Conclusion

The paper has investigated a specialized use of the NA particle *ʔillaa*. In this use, *ʔillaa* acts as a response particle licensed exclusively in negative contexts. Its function parallels that of *balaa* in CA, as both affirm the positive truth of propositions following negative claims. Syntactically, *ʔillaa* appears in clause-initial position and stands alone with complete meaning. The proposed HPSG analysis demonstrates that *ʔillaa* is a clausal particle with an empty argument structure and a semantic nucleus marked as *neg.aff*, distinguishing it from the 'typical' exclusion particle *ʔillaa* in SA. These lexical properties highlight how *ʔillaa* works independently at the syntactic level while relying on the preceding negative context for its interpretation, providing a sharper insight into how response particles function across Arabic varieties.

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