Subject Verb Agreement in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Saudi Dialect of Arabic (SA): A New Minimalist Account

Khalaf M. J. AlShammiry[1]

Abstract

Using Chomsky's theory of syntax, the Minimalist Program (MP) (1993, 1995, 2000), this paper presents a new analysis for the ongoing debatable word order variation in both Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and the Saudi dialect of Arabic (SA). It has been noticed that in SVO order, the subject agrees partially with the verb; whereas in VSO order, the subject fully agrees with the verb. In SA, the subject always fully agrees with the verb in both word orders. Previous studies have debated whether the preverbal subject is a subject or a topic or a focus. I argue that the noun in the MSA and SA is a subject which is either base generated in the case of the MSA or moved from inside the clause in the case of SA; making use of the distinction between *al-jumlaal-ismiyya* " the nominal sentence" and *al-jumlaal-fi?liyya* "the verbal sentence" in Arabic, Abd Al-bidee (1996) and among others, I ague that there is a Head Phrase (HP) at the left periphery of the clause where the subject surfaces to check the nominal head feature of the HP and to mark the clause nominal. For this argument, I assume that the clitic onto the verb is either an agreement marker or a subject and the number feature is weak in MSA and strong in SA. In addition, before the syntax, the noun is split into an expletive and a noun or a clitic and the TP in SA has two specs. The two supporting pieces of evidence for my argument are the subject of the embedded clauses and the structure of the wh-questions in MSA. The contribution of the paper lies in the fact that it investigates the agreement issue in a dialect that is, to my knowledge, heretofore uninvestigated; and adds to our understanding of the syntax of the agreement asymmetry in MSA and SA.

Keywords: Subject verb agreement, Head Phrase (HP), subject clitic, splitting, expletive

1. Introduction

Using Chomsky's theory of syntax, the Minimalist Program (MP)(1993, 1995, 2000), this paper presents a new analysis of the ongoing debatable word order variation in both Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and the Saudi dialect of Arabic (SA). It has been noticed that clauses with overt subjects in MSA can have either VSO or SVO order. In the former word order, the subject agrees partially with the verb, in gender; whereas in the later word order, the subject fully agrees with the verb in number, gender and person. In SA which has a similar syntactic behavior as most of other Arabic dialects, the subject always fully agrees with the verb in VSO and SVO word orders. In this paper, in the sentence below:

[1]Associate Professor of Linguistics, King Saud University, College of Languages and Translation (COLT), Riyadh, KSA, and Vice President for Quality, Development and Community Services, Northern Border University, Arar, KSA

a.   ar-rjaalHadar-u
     the-men attend.past-3pl.masc

"The men attended."

I will argue that the SVO clause in both MSA and SAshould be analyzed as the following tree shows:

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                        HP
                    ╱    |    ╲
              ar-rjaal        IP2
              the-men       ╱     ╲
                                IP1
                            ╱        ╲
                      expletive         I
                                    ╱      ╲
                              Hadar-u          VP
                          Hadar.past-3pl.masc
                            "The men attended"
```
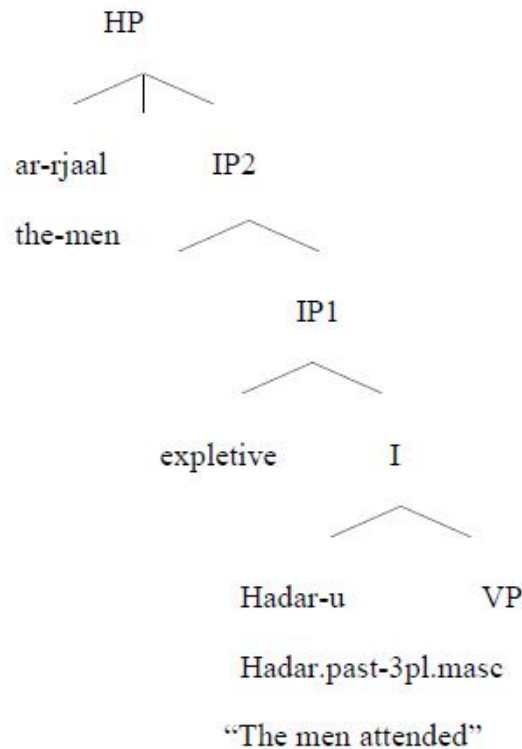
From the tree in (2), we see that the subject*ar-rijaal* "the men" appears preverballyin the left periphery of the clause;and there is an expletive in the spec of IP. I argue, under the Minimalist Approach Chomsky (1993, 1995, 2000) that there is a splitting stage right before the syntax in which the noun is split into an expletive a null pronoun of some sort that checks gender agreement and an overt noun or a clitic that merges with the verb and checks the number agreement. In MSA and because the noun feature of the noun is not strong, the subject which is in this case the clitic "**u**" amalgamates into the verb and checks the number agreement on the verb at the PF level.Making use of the distinction between *jumlaismiyya* "nominal sentence" in which the sentence starts with a noun and *jumlafi?liyya* "verbal sentence" in whichit starts with a verb in Arabic Abd Al-bidee (1996), Al-NaquuT (2003), Ibnu Hishaam (1963) and among others, I argue that the noun *ar-rjaal* "the men" at the left periphery of the clause which came as a result of the splitting process is base generated to mark the sentence nominal; in other word, to check the nominal feature of the Head Phrase (HP).

In SA,the noun *ar-rjaal* "the men" is not base generated at the left periphery of the clause, it is moved from inside clause to check the number feature and to mark the sentence nominal; in other word, to check the nominal feature of the Head Phrase (HP).I assume that in the case of SA there are two specs for the Inflectional Phrase (IP1 and IP2); one is for the expletive and the other for the subject.In both MSA and SA, the expletive is always base generated in the spec of IP where it checks the gender feature and then it deletes in the PF. The contribution of the paper lies in the fact that it investigates the agreement issue in a dialect that is, to my knowledge, heretofore uninvestigated; and adds to our understanding of the syntax of the agreement asymmetry in MSA and ST.

The organization of the paper is as follows: in the next section, 2. I discuss the noun verb agreement in MSA and SA.Section 3 goes over previous analysis of the agreement asymmetry in MSA. In section 4, I present my analysis of the noun verb agreement in MSA and SA. Section 5 concludes the paper by outlining descriptive and theoretical conclusions and remaining puzzles.

2. Subject verb agreement in MSA and TA

2. 1. Subject verb agreement in MSA

It is a well-known syntactic phenomenon that there is a subject verb agreement asymmetry in MSA that is sensitive to word order. In **VSO** order, the verb agrees with subject in gender only:

3. a. Hadar-**a**al-rijaal-**u**
attend.past-3sg.masc the-man-pl.masc
"The men attended."

 b. Hadar-**at**al-fatayat-**tu**
    attend.past-3sg.fem the-girl-pl.fem
"The girls attended."

We could see that, in (3ab), the verb *Hadar-u* "attended" agrees with the postverbalsubject*al-rijaal* "the men" only in gender. This is clear from the clitic used in each of the two sentences; in (3a), the third masculine singular"**a**" appears onto the verb with the subject*al-rijaal-u* "the men", whereas the third feminine singular"**at**" appears ontothe verb with feminine subject*al-fatayat-tu*"the girls". Number agreement is not manifested.

In **SVO** order, the verb fully agrees with the subject in gender and number.

4. a. al-rijaal-**u**Hadar-**u**
the-man-pl.masc attend.past-3pl.masc
"The men attended."

  b. al-fatayat-**tu**Hadar-**na**
the-girl-pl.fem attend.past-3pl.fem
"The girls attended."

We could see that, in (4ab), the verb *Hadar-u* "attended" fully agrees with the preverbal subject in gender and number. In (4a), the third masculine plural clitic "**u**" appears ontothe verb with the masculinesubject*al-rijaal-u* "the men", whereas in (4b) the third feminine plural "**na**" appears onto the verb with the feminine subject*al-fatayat-tu.*After going over the subject verb agreement in MSA, now, let us see how agreement is manifested in SA.

2. 2. Subject verb agreement in SA

As other dialects of Arabic, contrary to MSA, the verb fully agrees with the pre-and-post verbal subject.

5. a. al-rijaalHadar-**u**
the-men attend.past-3pl.masc
"The men attended."

b. Hadar-**u**al-rijaal
Attend.past-3pl.masc the-men
"The men attended."

We could see that in (5ab), the verb *Hadar-u* "attended" fully agrees with the preverbal and postverbalsubjects in gender and number. In both orders, the third masculineplural"**u**" appears ontothe verb with the subject*al-rijaal* "the men".

To sum up this section, here is a table showing the subject verb agreement in MSA and SA.

1. Subject verb agreement in MSA and SA

	Preverbal subject	**Postverbalsubject**
MSA	Full agreement	**No number agreement**
SA	Full agreement	Full agreement

As the table (1) shows, it is only when the subject appears postverbally in MSA, the number agreement is not manifested. Having described the agreement system in both MSA and SA, and before I provide a new analysis of this phenomenon, next, I review the various syntactic analyses that have been previously proposed to explain thissubject verb agreement issue.

3. Previous analyses of the agreement issue in MSA

In the literature, during the Government and Binding Theory (GB) and the Minimalist Program (MP) eras, several analyses have been proposed to explain the agreement issue in MSA.There are grammarians who analyze the preverbal subject as a subject among those, Mohammad (1990, 2000),Aoun, Benmamoun and Sportiche (1994),Bolotin (1995) and Benmamoun (2000) among others; others like Ouhalla (1991, 1994, 1997), FassiFehri (1988, 1993) and Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou (1998)among others, take the preverbal subject as a topic or a focus.

To discuss some, Mohammad (1990) proposes what he calls "Null Expletive Analysis"; under this proposal, he assumes the existence of a covert null empty expletive in the spec of IP; in the VSO order, the verb moves to I to agree with the expletive pronoun in the spec of IP. With the presence of a subject in the spec of VP, he assumes that the expletive is co-indexed with the subject in the spec of VP. Nominative case in this case is transmitted from the expletive in the spec of IP to the postverbal subject. In other words, he assumes that the I lowers to the verb which partially agrees with the subject in the spec of VP. In the SVO order, he assumes that it is the result of the subject movement to the spec of the IP. The problems with Mohammad's proposal is with the idea of lowering which is abandoned in Chomskyian's subsequent theories. Not to mention, the idea of having two subjects in the clause in the spec of I and spec of VP is questionable. Besides, Mohammad's proposal does not give any answer for the full agreement manifested in dialects of Arabic.

Aoun, Benmamoun and Sportiche (1994), assume that in both VSO and SVO word orders the subject raises to the Spec of IP. To derive the VSO order, they assume that the verb raises from the head of IP to a project higher than the IP, the Focus Phrase (FP). According to them, number feature is a grammatical feature and it cannot be spelled out when the verb raises to the FP. The verb only preserves gender agreement.The problem with Aoun et al's analysis is that they do not provide any supporting evidence of the raising operation the verb undergoes; and not to mention, they do not say why in the first place the verb needs to move to a FP. Besides, this analysis does not give an answer for the full agreement manifested in dialects of Arabic.

Ouhalla (1994) assuming that the Tense Phrase (TP) is higher than the Agreement Phrase (AgrP), proposes that the subject in SVO is a topic base generated it its surface position in the left periphery of the clause. In his analysis, he proposes that the verb moves to AgrP to get its agreement features in both VSO and SVO word orders. Then the V+AGR raises to the TP to get tense features. However, in the VSO order, the subject remains in situ in the spec of VP and receives default case. In the SVO order, the preverbal subject is a topic base generated in its surface position and is coindexed with a resumptive pronoun in the spec of VP. In a later study, Ouhalla (1997) proposes that the preverbal NP has moved to spec of FP. See FassiFehri (1988, 1993), Akkal (1996) and Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou (1998) for a topic or focus account of the preverbal subject.

Again, the problem with Ouhalla's analysis is that the analysis does not provide any supporting evidence of the raising operation the verb undergoes; and not to mention, they do not say why in the first place the verb needs to move to a FP. Besides, this analysis does not give an answer for the full agreement manifested in dialects of Arabic.

To account for the word order variation in MSA using the first version of Minimalist Program, AgrP hypothesis, Bolotin (1995) proposes an inflectional parameter account for the VSO and SVO word order variation in MSA; she proposes that the variation depends on the strength and weakness of the noun and verb features on Agreement Subject Phrase (AgrsP). In other words, it is only Agr that makes the difference. According to her analysis, in the VSO order, the verb moves as far as the T because the verb feature of T is strong; and because the verb feature of Agr is weak, the verb does not raise to Agr before spell out. In this order, both noun feature of T and noun feature of Agr are weak. In the SVO order, the verb and noun feature of Agr are strong which requires that the verb and subject move to AgrsP. To extend her analysis to dialects of Arabic and compared to MSA, Bolotin proposes that in the VSO order, the verb feature of Agr is strong in dialects of Arabic.

Although Bolotin's analysis is very innovative, Bolotin depends on Agr node which has been abandoned from Chomskian's 2000 version of the Minimalist Program. According to the new development of the program, Agr does not have case or phi-features and the feature of the DP are checked on functional nodes of projections "relational properties of categories, not properties inherited to them".

Again, with the spirit of the Minimalist Program, Benmamoun (2000) provides a new analysis for the word order variation in Arabic; he proposes that the verb in both VSO and SVO word order comes fully inflected from the numeration. As explanation for the absence of the number agreement in the VSO word order, he proposes that it results from merging of the verb and the subject in the PF component. They become one unit, and the subject only spells out the number feature; spelling the feature on the verb then is to be redundant.

Again, this analysis is not without problems; the question that this analysis raises is why some features are redundant whereas others are not. Besides, this analysis does not give an answer for the full agreement manifested in dialects of Arabic. After showing that none of the pervious accounts discussed here without weaknesses, I would like next to argue for a new analysis of the subject verb issue in MSA and SA.

4. A new analysis of the subject verb issue in MSA and SA

4. 1. The splitting and the subject clitic analysis

One of the main weaknesses of the aforementioned studies is assuming that in MSA the subject appearspreverbally with full agreement on the verb in SVO word order and postverbally with partial agreement on the verbin VSO word order; Thisis something against the essence of the Minimalist Program (Chomsky's 1993 and related work that follow) which assumes no optionality.Moreover, previous analyses do not account for clauses referred to as subject-less clauses where the agreement clitic, as it has been called, is manifested as in the following clause:

6. Hadar-**u**
Attend.past-3pl.masc
"They attended."

We see that in (6), the verb *Hadar-u* "attended" carries the plural masculine clitic "**u**"while the subject is not used. Therefore, there must be a better explanation for the fact in hands.Now, recall the subject agreement in MSA and SA (the table is repeated below for convenience).

2. Subject verb agreement in MSA and SA

	Preverbal subject	Postverbalsubject
MSA	Full agreement	**No number agreement**
SA	Full agreement	Full agreement

As the table (2) shows, the number agreement clitic on the verb is only lost when the subject appears postverbally in MSA. In all other positions, the clitic is manifested. Now, let us merge the new data about the subject-less clause in table (2) into table (1) discussed earlier.

3. Subjectverb agreement in MSA and SA

	Preverbal subject	Postverbalsubject	Subject-less clause
MSA	Full agreement	**No number agreement**	Full agreement
SA	Full agreement	Full agreement	Full agreement

Table (3) gives us a clear comprehensive picture of the issue in hands; again, it is only when the subject appears postverbally in MSA the agreement clitic is lost. Now, someone might wonder why the presence and the absence of thepreverbal subject in MSA and SAclauses do not affect the clitic manifestation. Can someone say that the subject appearance is of no use as far as the appearance of the clitic on the verb?Before commenting, let us instead of referring to the clitic as an agreement clitic, let us just call it a clitic; and let us refer to subject-less clauses as clauses with clitics only. Now, here are two tables for SVO and clauses with clitics:

4. Verbs with preverbal subject

	The preverbal subject	The verb
MSA	√	**V+clitic**
SA	√	V+clitic

5. Verbs without preverbal subject (clauses with clitics only)

	The preverbal subject	The verb
MSA	X	**V+clitic**
SA	X	V+clitic

We see from tables (4 and 5) that the presence and absence of the preverbal subject does not influence the clitic on the verb. The clitic is always present. However, when the subject appears postverbally, the clitic is not manifested on the verb in the case of MSA clauses as the following tables show.

6. Verbs with post verbal subject

	The verb	The postverbal subject
MSA	**V+<u>none</u>**	√
SA	**V+clitic**	√

7. Verbs without post verbal subject (clauses with clitics only)

	The verb	The postverbal subject
MSA	**V+clitic**	X
SA	**V+clitic**	X

We see from (6 and 7) that the presence or absence of the postverbal subject influences the clitic on the verb in the case of MSA but not SA. In MSA, the clitic is absent when the postverbal subject is present.In other words, the clitic and the postverbal subject are in complementary distribution in MSA. If one occurs the other does not.A fact that is not true for SA.

Now, from the data above, I argue that although the MSA and SA clauses look superficially internally similar and the SA is a dialect of MSA, they are different. I argue that in MSA, the number agreement is weak and the verb comes from the numeration uninflected; whereas the number agreement in SA is strong and the verb is fully inflected for phi-features. Second, I hypothesize that there exists a stage before the syntax in which the noun is split into (an expletive, a nominative noun or a clitic), a splitting stage. Third, I assume that the clitic is a homophone. In other words, it is a manifestation of the number agreement and a subject; in MSA, the clitic is the subject that merges into the verb and checks the number feature; whereas, in SA,it is either a subject or a an agreementclitic depending on the presence or absence of the noun. Finally, I assume thatthe expletive base generated into the sepc of IP checks gender feature and the nominative case.To do this, I assume subject nouns always carry default nominative case unless case marked otherwise.

With this new analysis of the data, and since postverbal subject and clauses with clitics only make the difference; let us analyze the following two clauses.

7. Hadaraal-rijaal-**u**   MSA
Attend.past-3sg.masc the-men-pl.masc
"The men attended."

8. Hadar-**u**al-rijaalSA
Attend.past-3pl.masc the-men
"The men attended."

9. Hadar-**u**(clauses with clitics only in MSA/SA**)**
Attend.past-3pl.masc
"They attended."

8. the analysis of the clauses 7, 8 and 9 above "the men/they attended"

	The expletive	The verb	The agreement clitic	The subject
MSA	√	Hadar	**None(weak number agreement)**	Al-rijaal-u **u (clauses with clitics only)**
SA	√	Hadar	**u**	Al-rjaal **u (clauses with clitics only)**

From table (8), one could see that in MSAwhen the number feature is weak, the verb *Hadar* "attended" does not carry the number agreementclitic; and the subject can be a noun *al-rijaal-u*"the men" ora plural masculine clitic "**u**". In the case of SA, because the number feature is strong, we have two clitics; one is the agreement cliticcliticizing onto the verb and the other the subject clitic "**u**". Notice that, in both MSA and SA, the expletive is used and the noun is in complementary distribution with the subject clitic in the post verbalposition. And here is how the clause with clitics only is constructed; in MSA,with the absence of the agreement clitic, the subject clitic "**u**" clitizes onto the verb *Hadar* "attended", whereas in case of SA, the agreement clitic"**u**" and the subject clitic"**u**" which happen to be a homophone merge andclitize onto the verb. In other words, the clausewith a clitic onlyhas nosubject; it is the clitic itself cliticizing onto the verb; therefore, we no longer need to call them subject-less clauses. Now, one might wonder why the subject noun is used atthe left periphery of the clause sense the subject clitic"**u**" can do the function.

Making use of the distinction between *al- jumlaal-ismiyya* " the nominal sentence" in which the sentence starts with a noun and *al-jumlaal-fi?liyya* "the verbal sentence" in which it starts with a verb in Arabic, Abd Al-bidee (1996), Al-NaquuT (2003), Ibnu Hishaam (1963)and among others,I assume that the subject noun appears in the left periphery of the clause in both MSA and SAto check the nominal of the Head Phrase (HP) for marking the sentence nominal; as I have mentioned above, the difference is that in MSA, after the splitting takes place, the subject is base generated at the left periphery of the clause, whereas,it is moved from inside the SA clause;in SA,the subject firstmoves to the spec of IP to check the number feature which is strong in SA and then it moves to Head Phrase (HP) to check the nominal feature and mark the sentence nominal.The pieces of evidence for my analysis come from the subject of the embedded clause and the structure of the wh-questions. The next subsection discusses both pieces of evidence.

4. 2. Evidence of the new analysis

4. 2. 1. The subject of the embedded clauses

I have argued that the subject of the MSA and SA clause is always nominative unless otherwise case marked and it appears at the left periphery of the clause in Head Phrase (HP) for checking the nominal feature and marking the clausenominal. The first piece of evidence of my argument comes from the subject of the embedded clause in MSA in which the subject case marked by an outsider case assigner, the complementizer*ana* "that" as the following sentence shows.

9. thakar-a ***ana***al-rijaal-**a**Hadar-**u**
   mention.past-3sg.masc that the-men-**accu**attend.past-3pl.masc
"He mentioned that the men attended."

We could see from (9) that the subject of the embedded clause*al-rijaal-a* "the men" carries an accusative case marker "**a**".With the fact that the subject of a clause should be assigned nominative case by the verb in this case*Hadar-u* "attended", one needsto assume either that the subject has been assigned two cases one by the verb and one by an external case assigner, the complementizer*ana* "that", or it might be the subject never assigned a nominative case at the first place; it has been assigned only accusative case by the complementizer. With the fact that it is not possible that the noun is assigned two different cases, we are left with the assumption that the complementizer*ana* "that" is the onlyassigner. This fact supports my analysis of the preverbal subjects, it shows that the subject coming from the numeration carrying a default case is in a position higher than the IP; It is in the Head Phrase (HP); and there must be another identity that takes care of checking the nominative case against the one on the verb; it is the expletive I am proposing that takes care of this task. Let us turn to the second piece of supporting evidence to my analysis that is the structure of the wh-questions.

4. 2. 2.The structure of the wh-questions

My second piece of evidence of the analysis of the data here comes from the structure of the wh-questions in MSA. As a matter of fact, in MSA, when a wh-question is formed out of a sentence with a plural clitic, the verb appears next to the wh-item at the left periphery of the clause without the plural clitic cliticizing onto it.

10. mataHadar-**a**al-rijaal-u?
when attend.past-3sg.masc the-man-pl.masc
"When did the men attend?"

11. *mataHadar-**u**al-rijaal-u?
when attend.past-3pl.masc the-man-pl.masc
"When did the men attend?"

From (10), one could see that although the subject *al-rijaal-u*"the men" is a plural subject, the verb *Hadar-a* "attended" does not carry any plural clitc; the third singular masculine clitic "**a**" is used; we could see in (11)the use of the plural clitic "**u**" renders the question ungrammatical. This confirms that the verb of the MSA clause is not inflected with number agreement and that the subject of MSA clause is never in the spec of IP. In other words, if the subject lands in the spec of the IP before the verb moves next to the wh-item, we would expect the verb to carries the plural clitic. Now, let us take wh-questions ofa clause with a subject clitic.

12. mataHadar-**u**?
when attend.past-3pl.masc
"When did they attend?"

13. *mataHadar-**a**?
 when attend.past-3sg.masc
    "When did they attend?"

Given what I have established under(10 and 11) above, (12 and 13)are surprising. We could see thatin (12) although the plural clitic "**u**" is attached to the verb surfacing next to the wh-item *mata* "when", the sentence is still grammatical; and the use ofthe clitic "**a**" renders the sentence ungrammatical in (13). It is not really a surprise;recall my analysis of clauses with clitics only, the masculine plural clitic "**u**" attached to the verb *Hadar-u* "attended" is not an agreement clitic, it is the subject of the clause.This supports my analysis of the nature and the place of the subject in the SVO clauses; and the existence of the Head Phrase (HP)at the left periphery of the clause.

In this section, I have argued that although the MSA and SA clauses look superficially internally similar and the SA is a dialect of MSA, they are in fact different. I have argued that in MSA, the number agreement is weak and the verb comes from the numeration uninflected; whereas the number agreement in SA is strong and the verb is fully inflected for phi-features. Second, I hypothesize that there exists a stage before the syntax in which the noun is split into (an expletive, a nominative noun or a clitic), a splitting stage. Third, I assume that the clitic is a homophone. In other words, it is a manifestation of the number agreement and a subject; in MSA, the clitic is the subject that merges into the verb and checks the number feature; whereas in SA, it is either a subject or an agreement clitic depending on the presence or absence of the noun. In both MSA and SA, the noun at the left periphery of the clause is a subject and it is either base generated in the MSA or moved from inside of the clause in SA.The landing position of the noun is a head Phrase (HP) to mark the clause nominal. Finally, I assume that the expletive base generated into the spec of IP checks gender feature and the nominative case. To do this, I assume subject nouns always carry default nominative case unless case marked otherwise. Two pieces of evidence supporting my argument have been presented; the subject of the embedded clauses and the structure of the wh-questions.

5. Conclusion.

In this paper, I have presented a new analysis of the subject verb issue in MSA and SA. I have argued that although theSA is considered to be a dialect of MSA, they are structurally different. In MSA, the noun feature is weak; whereas, it is strong in SA. In SVO words order, in both MSA and SA, the noun at the left periphery of the clause is a subject and it is either base generated in the MSA or moved from inside of the clause in SA.The landing position of the noun is a head Phrase (HP) to mark the clause nominal. I have proposed that there is a stage before the syntax in which the noun is split into (an expletive, a nominative noun or aclitic); and that the clitic is a homophone and in complementary distribution with the noun. That is to say, in MSA, the clitic is always a subject whereas it is either a subject or an agreement clitic in the SA. My two supporting pieces of evidence come from the subject of the embedded clauses and the structure of the wh-questions. The contribution of the paper lies in the fact that it investigates the agreement issue in a dialect that is, to my knowledge, heretofore uninvestigated; and adds to our understanding of the syntax of the agreement asymmetry in MSA and SA.

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