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The concept of mark and its morpho-syntactic realisation: the example of the subject in Arabic

> Any comparison of syntactic systems must hold apart two orders of determination: on the one hand the similarities and differences of deep phrase structure, and on the other hand the similarities and differences of their morphological realisations. This is made possible through the concept of mark, as long as one interprets it properly.
>
> J.-C. Milner, Ordres et raisons de langue, 1982

Introduction

The concept of mark, borrowed from phonology and formulated by N. S. Troubetzkoy and R. Jakobson in the nineteen-thirties, is significant in the definition of the syntactic functions of terms having a sequential syntagmatic relation. The application of this concept (cf. G.H. Greenberg (1966), N. Chomsky and M. Halle (1968), and H. Van Riemsdijk (1978)) makes it possible to analyze the interwoven structures of an argument-structure, not according to a linear organisation, but according to differential features whose morphological marking has a quite different function from that of simple indicator. The structural markers therefore determine the limits of the specific intonations of lexical units and their morphological occurrences, and thus give information about the functions they take on in an argument-structure. In this article we shall try to illustrate the syntactic realisation of this concept in Arabic, proceeding through the following stages: we shall first begin with an outline of the concept of mark in order to understand how it works syntactically. Then we shall examine how the Arab grammatical tradition has approached case marking and the function of subject. This will

then lead us to redefine the subject in terms of mark and to identify it as an archi-function marked compulsorily in the nominative whatever the structure of the argument-structure in which it occurs.

1. The Concept of Mark
1.1. About the concept

The concept of mark is an oppositive or differential concept: it opposes a marked term and an unmarked term in order to distinguish between them. N.S. Troubetzkoy (1931: 97) introduces the concept thus:

"the two members of a correlative opposition (for instance the opposition voiced/unvoiced) are not equivalent: one of them has the feature in question (or has it in its oppositive form), whereas the other one does not have it (or has it in its negative form). We call the first one marked, and the second one unmarked."

The opposition marked/unmarked is thus based on a privative opposition in which the term which is not marked bears the sign zero. The usage of the concept of mark as it has been outlined so far is linked to the analysis of the differential relations that exist either between different languages, as in a comparative grammar, or between opposed terms in one language. In comparison with the unmarked term, the marked term is therefore complex. Using this concept of mark, and following A. Clas et al (1968), we can analyze the phonemes /t/ and /d/ in French as they appear in [twa] and [dwa], as follows:

/t/: oral consonant, plosive, alveo-dental, lingual, apical, unvoiced
/d/: oral consonant, plosive, alveo-dental, lingual, apical, voiced

The articulatory realisation of the phonemes /t/ and /d/ occurs when the tip of the tongue is pressed strongly against the front teeth and the front of the alveolar ridge, thus forming an occlusion; the lips are parted and the soft palate is raised. However, and this is where the concept of mark comes in, the vocal cords do not vibrate for /t/ whereas they do for /d/. Phonologically speaking, we will say that the phoneme /d/ is marked and that the phoneme /t/ is unmarked as far as voicing is concerned. In other words, /d/ = /t/ + voicing. Voicing is thus a differential feature which allows to distinguish between the two phonemes, one bearing a specific mark that is absent in the other.

1.2. Morpho-syntactic transposition

R. Jakobson (1963: 185) defines the morpho-syntactic use of the opposition marked/unmarked as follows:

"the general signification of a marked category resides in the fact that it asserts the presence of a certain property (positive or negative) A; the general signification of the corresponding unmarked category reveals nothing about the presence of A and is used mainly, but not exclusively, to indicate the absence of A."

The opposition marked/unmarked is realized in the expression of case. In other words, all semantically significant syntactic relations are represented by case labels. Case relations are thus part of an oppositive system that can be interpreted in terms of mark. They are generally considered as morpho-syntactic clues and as a grammatical means for identifying and grouping together nominal terms in the unit of the sentence. The designation of a noun phrase as subject, for example, therefore depends on its nominative case marking. At least this is what happens in certain languages such as Latin, where the nominative is the case of the grammatical subject:

1. Cloelia   Tiberim   tranauit.
   Clelia-nom.   the-Tiber-acc.   cross-perf.-3pers-sing.
   "Clelia crossed the Tiber".

This identification seems to impose itself a priori, for the nominative is by definition the case of the subject and all its functions are limited to that.

Transposing the notion of mark to the morphological level enables us to create a hierarchy of grammatical values and to give a wider extension to the meaning of morphological marking; it also enables us to see that a given category, such as case, tense or mode—in other words those categories often called unmarked—has a meaning similar to that of another category of the same type, with something more at the morphological level: the mark. Thus, as R. Jakobson has shown (1971: II, 4), the Russian word oslica, 'she-ass', indicates that it is a female animal, whereas the general signification of the word osël, 'ass', bears no information on the sex of the animal; it is therefore neuter and unmarked because it can be used for male and female animals. The first word is marked as far as sexual opposition is concerned. It is the same thing in English with the two oppositive terms 'dog' and 'bitch': the first one has a wider extension whereas the second is more restricted and conveys a notional delimitation narrower than that of the first. 'Bitch' is thus marked, whereas 'dog' is not. We can therefore infer that the term which is

morphologically unmarked is simpler and has fewer meaning components than the term which is marked.

2. Grammatical Data in Arabic
2.1. The grammarians' theses.

In the Arab grammatical tradition (cf. J.-P. Guillaume, 1986 and 1988), nominal and verbal constituents are generally represented by the dichotomy nominal sentence/verbal sentence, whose grammatical structures are different, in particular at the level of surface structure. In the nominal sentence, the subject comes first and is inchoative (mubtada') whereas the verbal sentence begins with a verb to which the subject is postposed (what Arab grammarians call fā'il, that is to say "agent"). In spite of this structural difference between the two types of sentences, the Arab grammatical tradition stressed the similarity between them concerning the position and the status of the subject. Indeed, in both cases, the subject must be in the nominative (marfū'). Ibn Ya'īš (d. 1245) offers the following explanation (Šarḥ, 1. 72):

"The nominative is the mark of agentivity (fā'ilīya) [...]. Its function is to distinguish between the subject and the complement which can each be either subject or complement. The reason why the inchoative (mubtada') and the enunciative are put in the nominative is not to get rid of ambiguity, but originates in a kind of preference (istiḥsān) and assimilation (tašbīh) in so far as each of them (the agent of the verbal sentence and the mubtada' of the nominal sentence) is predicated (muḫbar 'anhu)."

Another grammarian who came before Ibn Ya'īš, Al-Mubarrad (d. 898), does not hesitate in his Muqtaḍab (1. 8) to assimilate sentences like (1) with sentences like (2):

1. qām-a   Zayd-un.
    get up-perf-3pers-masc-sing.   Zayd-nom.
    "Zayd got up."

2. al-qā'im-u   Zayd-un.
    the-getting up -nom.   Zayd-nom.
    "The one who got up is Zayd."

Of course, there is a structural difference between (1) and (2) since (2) displays a thematisation which does not exist in (1); but Al-Mubarrad's argument is that in both cases Zayd is the subject, and that as such it must be in the nominative. There is an equational relation between subjecthood and the nominative. A later grammarian, Az-Zaǧǧāǧī (d. 949), explains the reasons for such an equation as follows (Al-Iḍāḥ: 124):

"the nominative is the first case in the declension because it is the mark of the agent (fāʻil), of the inchoative (mubtadaʼ), and of what is similar to them."

There is therefore a primacy of the nominative over the other case markers. This hierarchy is determined by two distinct factors: one is semantic and establishes the agent and the inchoative as the supports of any predicative relation and the lexical units about which something is predicated; the other is syntactic and establishes the agent and the inchoative as compulsory first complements in any meaningful phrase structure. The two other marks, that is to say the accusative and the genitive, are the marks of the augmentative terms, which are not essential to the constitution of the utterance. The noun in the accusative is a mafʻūl (a term which means literally "the one who undergoes", and which includes the object complement, the state complement, the accompaniment complement, the absolute complement, the circumstantial and the specificative). The accusative is therefore the mark of all the noun phrases that add up to a predicative relation which is already saturated. As for the noun in the genitive, it is an annexation complement (iḍāfa). Az-Zaǧǧāǧī (Al-Īḍāḥ: 69) illustrates these different functions and their markers as follows:

3. ḍarab-a   Zayd-un   ʻAmr-an.
   hit-perf-3pers-masc-sing.   Zayd-nom.   Amr-acc.
   "Zayd hit Amr."

4. hāḏā   ǧulām-u   Zayd-in.
   this one-nom.   slave-nom.   Zayd-gen.
   "This one is Zayd's slave."

For Az-Zaǧǧāǧī, the nominative of Zayd in (3) is an indicator of function and identifies Zayd as an agentive or causal authority responsible for what happens to ʻAmr. The accusative of ʻAmr in (3) points to its function of orientation, and in (4) the genitive of Zayd is the mark of its annexation to ǧulām (slave).

2.2. Notional government

Arab grammarians based the grammaticalisation of Arabic mainly on the way the language was spoken by native speakers, and they were not content with limiting it to a set of mechanical rules. For instance, Sībawayhi (d. 793) considered that the nominal sentence is the basis of the verbal sentence, and that the verbal sentence is only derived from the nominal sentence. Therefore

the nominal sentence seems to be at the basis of the marking of the subject in the nominative. Indeed, according to Sībawayhi (Al-Kitāb: 23), "the first state of the noun is the ibtidā' (initialization)". In Sībawayhi's theoretical metalanguage, this means that the nominal sentence in which the noun occurs as a subject is a simple assertion, without any modality, which opens the speech and is the starting point for any enunciative act. Let us consider the following sentences borrowed from Sībawayhi's Al-Kitāb (23):

5. 'Abdu-l-lāh-i   aẖū-ka.
    'Abdallāh-nom.   brother-nom.-your
    "'Abdallāh is your brother."

6. hāḏā   aẖū-ka.
    this one-nom.   brother-nom.-your
    "This one is your brother."

According to Sībawayhi, (5) and (6) are both nominal sentences made up of a musnad (enunciative) and a musnad ilayh (inchoative). Both sentences bear the mark of the nominative. The reasons for this case marking are not formal but notional. The ibtidā' (initialization), which is an operator of government, must be understood as an abstract category, impossible to spell phonetically, which shows that the enunciator is responsible for the utterance and links it to a hic and a nunc characteristic of any situation of enunciation. The definition given by Ibn Ğinnī (d. 1001) in Al-Lumaʿ (71) is extremely explicit:

"The mubtada' is any noun with which you start, that you bare of all formal rections [...], and that you establish as first in relation to a second. It is marked in the nominative by the ibtidā'."

The term mubtada' thus means "that with which one starts". In other words, if the nominal sentence is considered as the basis of the verbal sentence, it is because it occurs as a minimal enunciative act and contrasts with more complex enunciative operations that bring in other parameters such as aspect or modality. The placing of the mubtada' in an initial position and its marking in the nominative are therefore not only a means of identification of the function of subject, but also a means of adding relief so that the enunciating subject can orient the predication in an egocentric way.

Initialization, as function of the noun, can therefore be interpreted as a formal category independent from the syntagmatic axis to which it belongs. It is called in so as to mark the most prominent element of the predicative relation: the noun.

2.3. Formal government.

In the Arab grammatical tradition, the concepts of mubtada' and ḫabar are used only in the nominal sentence, whereas the concepts of fiʻl (action) and fāʻil (agent) are used in the verbal sentence. In both cases, the two terms (mubtada' and ḫabar, or fiʻl and fāʻil) are sufficient to form an autonomous linguistic sequence which is aspectual for the verbal sentence and atemporal for the nominal sentence. Let us consider the following sentences taken from the Qur'ān:

7. talaqqà   Ādamu   min
   receive-perf.-3pers-masc-sing.   Adam-nom.   from
   rab-b-i-hi   kalimāt-in. (Qur'ān, II:37)
   God-gen.-his   word-plur.-gen.
   "Adam received words from his God."

8. ḫalaq-a   L-lāh-u   as-samawāt-i
   create-perf.-3pers-masc-sing.   God-nom.   the-heaven-plur-acc.
   wa   l-arḍ-a   bi-l-ḥaq-q-i. (Qur'ān, XXIX:44)
   and   the earth-acc.   with-truth-gen.
   "God created the heavens and the earth in all truth."

9. fa-aḍall-a-humā   aš-šayṭān-u
   and-make lost-perf.-3pers-masc-sing-them-dual   the devil-nom.
   fa-aḫrağa-humā   mim-mā
   and-make go out-perf.-3pers-masc-sing-them-dual   from there
   kān-a   fīhi. (Qur'ān, II:36)
   be-perf.-masc-dual   where
   "And the devil made them stumble and he drove them away from where they were."

10. lā   tukal-laf-u   nafs-un   il-lā
    not   cost-pass-3pers-fem-sing.   soul-nom.   except
    wus-ʻa-hā. (Qur'ān, II:233)
    means-acc-she
    "Each man has to do that only within his means."

11. tuwaf-f-a   kull-u   nafs-in
    receive-pass-3pers-fem-sing.   everything-nom.   soul-gen.

mā   kasab-at. (Qur'ān, II:281)
that which   earn-perf.-3pers-fem-sing.
"Each man will receive according to his deeds."

Sentences (7), (8), (9), (10), and (11) are all verbal sentences made up of a
verb conjugated in the third person singular; this third person is a kind of syn-
tactic constraint inherent in any verb that occurs in an argumental relation
and is related to a manifest noun, ṣarīḥ. The second term of the syntactic
structure is a noun (masculine in examples (7), (8) and (9), and feminine in
examples (10) and (11)) ending with -u, which is the mark of the nominative:
Ādam-u (Adam), Al-lāh-u (God), aš-šayṭān-u (the devil), nafs-un (man) and
kullu nafs-in (each man). This nominal term postposed to a verb is defined by
the Arab grammatical tradition as the agent (fā'il) of the sentence. The aim
of the label fā'il is to point to the causal authority which produces the process
described by the verb, and which is the source of the predicative relation. The
causal authority in question corresponds morpho-syntactically speaking to
the function of a nominal term ending in -u and is generally postposed to an
active verb or a derived noun at the positional level. We wish to stress, how-
ever, that this term may take on other non-agentive functions at the semantic
level, for it may be an agent just as it may be a patient, an addressee or a ben-
eficiary. The legitimacy of the term agent comes therefore not from a seman-
tic or an enunciative reference, but from a positional criterion associated to a
close relation with the verb in a verbal structure. Indeed, if we refer to the
Arab grammatical tradition, any nominal term postposed to a verb and end-
ing in -u must be considered as the real fā'il (agent) of the sentence in which
it occurs. At the same time, as far as government is concerned, the nomina-
tive ending -u is determined by the verb which, establishing itself as the pivot
of the argumental relation, designates the subject as the first term among its
complements. Moreover, the Arab grammatical tradition often mentioned
that the grammaticality of a sentence depends on the coexistence of a noun
ending in -u together with another element (a verb or something else): this
means that the semantic validity of a sentence, be it nominal or verbal,
depends on the presence of a nominal term ending in -u. This accounts for the
unanimity of Arab grammarians in defining the agent (fā'il) as the nominal
term ending in -u.

The obligation for the nominal term subject of a transitive verb in an
active structure to end with -u induced the Arab grammatical tradition to
require that the nominal term subject of a transitive verb in a passive struc-
ture end with -u as well. This is indeed a strange grammatical constraint, for
this complement (maf'ūl) always ends with the accusative, -a, in the active
structure, but loses it in the passive structure and takes on instead the ending

of the agent (fā'il)-u, even though the term has no agentive or causal function, as is shown in example (12), borrowed from Ibn Ǧinnī (Al-Luma': 82), and whose basic structure is (13):

12. ḍurib-a   Zayd-un.
    hit-perf.-pass-3pers-masc-sing.   Zayd-nom.
    "Zayd was hit."

13. ḍarab-a   Bakr-un   Zayd-an.
    hit-perf.-3pers-masc-sing.   Bakr-nom.   Zayd-acc.
    "Bakr hit Zayd."

It follows that the subject is in the nominative and bears the case ending -u in order to discriminate between the different grammatical functions. This discrimination is made possible through case marking, which puts the subject of the verbal sentence and that of the nominal sentence together in a homogeneous archi-function. This archi-function contrasts on the one hand with the object of the verbal sentence, and on the other hand with everything that is not a subject (the predicate of a nominal sentence that is apparently verbal, for example).

3. Case Inflexion and Case Marking
3.1. Re-formulation of the facts

Linguists as different as S.C. Dik (1981), G. Lazard (1979), J.-R. Vergnaud (1985), A. Rouveret (1980) and B. Comrie (1981) agree that case marking fulfills two fundamental functions:

  1. a function of characterisation, which identifies a syntactic or semantic property,
  2. a function of distinction and of singulation, which constitutes a desambiguative marking.

The primary function of case marking therefore consists in differentiating the different constituents of an argumental relation, especially the subject and the object, and in making it easier to recognize their respective syntactic and semantic functions. Indeed, in a large majority of languages, syntagmatic order and case marking are the only elements that provide information on the roles of the participants in a process or in a predicative relation. For greater convenience we shall distinguish between three elemen-

tary types of predication: state predication – as in (1), action predication with one noun phrase only – as in (2), and action predication with two noun phrases – as in (3):

1. Zayd-un   'ālim-un.
   Zayd-nom.   learned-nom.
   "Zayd is learned."

2. qām-a   Zayd-un.
   get up-perf.-3pers-masc-sing.   Zayd-nom.
   "Zayd got up."

3. ḍarab-a   Zayd-un   'Amr-an.
   hit-perf.-3pers-masc-sing.   Zayd-nom.   'Amr-acc.
   "Zayd hit 'Amr."

(3) is considered as the basic transitive form of predication. Two remarks must now be made:

   a. The term in the function of subject in these predicative relations is always marked in the nominative. It comes first in sentence (1) but is postposed to the verb in (2) and (3).

   b. The agentive or non-agentive character of the term coming first in a transitive phrase structure does not determine its function as subject. Indeed, it is well-known that transitivity is more than a semantic relation, since transitive utterances where no action transits through the verb are possible (4):

4. al-ğidār-u   yu-ḥīṭ-u   bi-l-madīnat-i.
   the wall-nom.   surround-pres.-3pers-masc-sing.   with the town-gen.
   "The wall surrounds the town."

In Arabic, an utterance with a transitive structure is characterized by the existence of two participants in the predication: one performs the action and is the agent of traditional grammars; the other undergoes the action and is the "non-agent". Morphologically speaking, the agent is the noun phrase marked in the nominative, whereas the patient, being passive, is marked in the accusative. In an utterance with one noun phrase only, only the agent occurs; it is always marked in the nominative. According to the writings of all the traditional Arab grammarians, "agent" is therefore a syntactic function and not a semantic role; on the other hand, the patient, since it is not considered as a causal authority and since it occurs in the predication as the effect of a transitive relation, is distinguished thanks to a differential morphologi-

cal marker, the accusative, which determines its syntactic function. In other words, in Arabic there is a permanent, compulsory morphological marker for the agent (the nominative), whereas the patient, or any other noun phrase postposed to the subject, is marked differently, depending on the grammatical order and on the governing elements to which it is linked. This is the specificity of the subject. It follows that in Arabic, the noun phrase in the function of subject can only be the compulsory complement of the verb.

The fundamental question that remains to be asked is the following: why, of the two nuclear terms constituting a minimal utterance with a transitive verb, is it the nominative—the case of the subject—that is syntactically marked, and not the accusative—the case of the object?

3.2. The nominative: a differential feature.

An attempt at an answer may be found in the very structure of Arabic. Indeed, it is a well-known fact that the Arabic language contains basically two sentence structures:

a. A transitive structure with two nuclear terms and the verb phrase, in other words a structure with a direct object. This direct object is defined as a noun phrase which is not preceded by a preposition added to the right of the verb, and which may be pronominalized in the suffix form -h, as can be seen in the following examples:

5. ra'ay-tu   Zayd-an
    see-perf.-1pers-masc-sing.   Zayd-acc.
    "I saw Zayd."

5a. ra'ay-tu-hu
    see-perf.-1pers-masc-sing.-him
    "I saw him."

6. qābal-a   Zayd-un   Hind-an.
    meet-perf.-3pers-masc-sing. Zayd-nom.   Hind-acc.
    "Zayd met Hind."

6a. qābal-a-hā   Zayd-un.
    meet-perf.-3pers-masc-sing-her   Zayd-nom.
    "Zayd met her."

b. An intransitive structure with only one nuclear term that does not have a non-prepositional postverbal noun phrase (nor a direct object complement), as in:

7. ḏahab-a   Zayd-un.
   leave-perf.-3 pers-masc-sing.   Zayd-nom.
   "Zayd left."

These two structures may be represented as follows:

    a. transitive structure: [A1 + A2]
    b. intransitive structure: [A1]

In the active voice, only the first term may have the function of subject. The comparison between the two structures, transitive and intransitive, shows that the first one is more complex than the second one. The difference between the two is paradigmatic. The morphological marking of one of the two noun phrases of the transitive structure therefore seems necessary in order to differentiate them. Given the similarity between the two structures as far as the first noun phrase is concerned, this first noun phrase can only be identified as the subject, because it conditions the lexical entry of the verb and is always the first complement in the transitive structure as well as in the intransitive structure, and because the subject is the first noun phrase in the order of the complements, in the lexis as well as in discourse. Compared to the intransitive structure, the transitive structure is therefore marked. Obviously, the presence in the transitive structure of two differently-marked arguments is at the basis of the complexity of the said transitive structure. The second noun phrase [A2] is responsible for this different morphological marking, for [A2] is responsible for transitivity. It would therefore be legitimate to speak of an archfunction subject, noted [S], and to conclude that the reason for case marking in Arabic is hierarchical and not semantic. The following table sums up our hypothesis:

Transitive structure: A1 [nom.] unmarked > A2 [acc.] marked
Intransitive structure: A1 [nom.] unmarked > 0

In both structures the subject has the same properties and the same characteristics. The unmarked term, to the left of the symbol >, must be identified as the dominant term, that which structures the predication and orients it, as opposed to the marked term, whose function is one of orientation. The first noun phrase is placed to the left of the symbol >, and it is unmarked both in

the transitive structure and in the intransitive structure. At the same time, the object contributes in large part to limiting the semantic function of the verb and to actualizing one of its potential semantic features. Thus,

8. šarib-a   Zayd-un   al-mā'a.
   drink-perf.-3pers-masc-sing.   Zayd-nom.   the water-nom.
   "Zayd drank the water."

excludes the meaning of:

8a. Zayd-un   sik-kīr-un.
    Zayd-nom.   alcoholic-nom.
    "Zayd is an alcoholic."

which is implied by the absolute meaning of šariba "drink". Indeed, it is at this precise level that the two essential functions of the object become obvious:

   a. the object indicates the transitivity of the verb: it signifies the action "transiting" through the verb, going from the subject to the object. Its morphological marking in the accusative is a differential marking in relation to the subject, and is therefore positional.

   b. The subject, since it is unmarked, is autonomous, contrary to the object: indeed, it occurs in both structures, transitive and intransitive, whereas the object depends on the transitivity of the verb phrase or on a prepositional noun phrase for its occurrence in a sentence.

4. From Case Inflexion to the Question of the Subject
4.1. The case of the inchoative

Arabic has an explicit case system, as well as the particularity of having at the same time cases that are governed and others that are not. To the first category corresponds the fāʻil of the Arab grammatical tradition, the realisation of which is carried out through a lexical selection performed by the verb. To the second category corresponds the mubtada' of the Arab grammatical tradition, the government of which is not carried out by a verb, but by a notional government: initialization, as the two following examples taken from Ibn Yaʻīš as-Sanʻānī's (d. 1281) Kitāb at-tahḏīb al-wasīṭ (114) show:

1. Zayd-un   ab-ū-hu   munṭaliq-un.
   Zayd-nom.   father-nom.-his   going-nom.

"Zayd's father is going."

2. Zayd-un   qā'im-un.
    Zayd-nom.   standing-nom.
    "Zayd is standing."

The morphological status of the two nouns in (1) and (2) linked by the predicative relation (isnād) is the nominative. The structural pattern in which they occur implies a discursive context that may be explained in terms of shift, or "embrayage", to borrow the term used by R. Jakobson (1963). The nominative in (1) and (2) is the effect of a government external to the utterance: indeed, no verb selects the nominative. As J.-C. Milner underlines, the nominative is "selected by a direct intervention of the speaker [...], it places the utterance in relation with the enunciation." The nominative implies a direct relation with the subject of the enunciation, in other words with the speaker. This link is spatiotemporal since the possibilities for referring utterances such as (1) and (2) are carried out according to localisation, that is to say here, and temporal contiguity, that is to say now. We may therefore claim that the marking of Zayd in (1) and (2) in the nominative is the effect of a rule of discourse saying that what is being talked about comes first. Zayd in (1) and (2) is not syntactically neuter, but unmarked as subject. In this sense it is a semantic exponent on which the indication of the theme is concentrated. This can be noted particularly in view of the fact that the superimposition of the particle expressing insistance or certainty in-na, "indeed", on utterances such as (1) and (2) inevitably leads to the marking of the inchoative in the accusative, as we may deduce from examples (1a) and (2a):

1a. in-na   Zayd-an   ab-ū-hu   munṭaliq-un.
    indeed   Zayd-acc.   father-nom.-his going-nom.
    "Indeed, Zayd's father is going."

2a. in-na   Zayd-an   qā'im-un.
    indeed   Zayd-acc.   standing-nom.
    "Indeed, Zayd is standing."

If the nominative in (1) may be explained by its position, which is in fact a function, such is not the case for the accusative in (1a) and (2a). Utterances (1a) and (2a) begin with a governing element in-na "indeed" which imposes the accusative on the inchoative. In (1) as in (2) Zayd is put in the nominative for want of a governing element allotting it that case or another one, as in (1a) and (2a). From now on we may define the inchoative as any category having

undergone a lexical selection. This selection is displayed at the morphologi-cal level by a marking in the nominative. The lexical selection as well as the marking in the nominative may be considered as resulting only from the sub-ject of the enunciation.

4.2. The nominative: another reading

The study of predicative relations in Arabic has shown that any lexical unit inserted in a phrase structure carries a morpheme identifying its function in the sentence. The subject, as an unmarked argument, holds a special position in the syntactic structure because of its relation to the predication on the one hand, and because of its initial position, especially in a nominal sentence, on the other hand. There is a correlation between the properties alloted to the subject and others allotted to the verb (3) and (4) and the complement (5):

3. qām-a   Zayd-un.
   get up-perf.-3pers-masc-sing.   Zayd-nom.
   "Zayd got up."

4. ḍarab-a   Zayd-un   'Amr-an.
   hit-perf.-3pers-masc-sing.   Zayd-nom.   'Amr-acc.
   "Zayd hit 'Amr."

5. Zayd-un   'ālim-un.
   Zayd-nom.   learned-nom.
   "Zayd is learned."

This implies a harmony between the term in subject position and the ver-bal inflexion. This relation is shown by agreement in gender, number and person. The realisation of the unmarked feature is reserved for the nomina-tive, whereas the marked feature is reserved for the other cases, that is to say the accusative and the genitive. As we remarked previously following the writings of the Arab grammatical tradition, this feature is a characteristic property of the subject. Several analyses (cf. M.A. Mohammad (1989), A. Fassi-Fehri (1994), H. Koopman and D. Sportiche (1991)) based on Chomskian theses have tried to explain why the subject is in the nominative in inflected languages such as Arabic, for example. Indeed, N. Chomsky (1981) suggests that finite clauses be distinguished from non-finite clauses by a feature named INF(lexion) which is a genuine component of S just as N" and V" are. This feature may bear the two values [± Tense]. When INF(lex-

ion) has the value [+ Tense] it is associated to an element noted AGR(eement) which is a set of features (person, gender and number). The two features INF(lexion) and AGR(eement) occur at the right of the verbal radical as morphological affixes and function as governing elements, thus allotting the nominative to the subject. Though this analysis is valid to explain the nominative of the subject in the Arabic verbal sentence, it cannot justify the nominative of the inchoative in the nominal sentence, since the nominal sentence has no verb and therefore no INF feature. However, we wish to suggest another analysis: the nominative is not a marker specific to the subject nor an effect of INF, but a property of the sentence. In other words, the nominative is a feature of S transmitted to its constituents and through which a NP and a VP are associated and put together in the sentence unit. The nominative materializes this relation between the NP and the VP. The marking in the nominative of the two constituents of the nominal sentence, the inflexional invariability of the subject of the verbal sentence, as well as the marking in the nominative of the subject in passive sentences support such an interpretation. If such a thesis can be accepted, it means that the nominative is the feature which specifies the privileged relation between a NP and a VP. We may then speak, like J.-C. Milner (1980 and 1982), of an abstract nominative, morphologically explicit, which is characteristic of what we can call the archfunction of the subject.

Conclusion

By using the concept of mark we were able to give an interpretation of the inflexional features in Arabic (nominative, accusative and genitive) different from that given by the Arab grammatical tradition. These inflexional features are markers allowing the identification of the constituents of the sentence in terms of grammatical functions. Moreover, the use of the concept of mark provided a useful way of interpreting grammatical relations in terms of a hierarchic organisation in which the subject is identified as the unmarked term in relation to the other constituents of the sentence. The syntactic category of the subject calls for a specific frame: the sentence, in order to be defined; this frame is subjected to selectional constraints by the verb. Such an analysis led us to see the nominative not as a simple feature of the subject, but as a property of the sentence materializing the relation between a NP and a VP in a relevant way.

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