

Why verbless sentences in Standard Arabic are verbless

RASHID AL-BALUSHI
Sultan Qaboos University

1. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to account for why present-tense topic-predicate sentences in Standard Arabic (SA), so-called verbless sentences, lack a copular verb, unlike their non-present-tense counterparts. In contrast to previous analyses which attribute the absence of the copula to some defect of present tense (Fassi Fehri 1981, Benmamoun 2000, Soltan 2007), I claim that a verbless sentence does not take a copular verb because its nominals do not need structural Case. The proposed analysis is in line with a conception of Case where structural Case is not licensed by ϕ -agreement or tense, but rather by a “Verbal Case” feature [VC] on the relevant Case-checking heads; thus structural Case is contingent on verbal licensing (Al-Balushi 2011). The present account assumes the Visibility Condition, under which structural Case is necessary to make arguments visible at LF for θ -role assignment (Aoun 1979, Chomsky 1981), and argues for a unique interaction between tense and word order. It is based on the proposal that verbless sentences are finite clauses (encoding [T], [ϕ], and [Mood]) composed of a topic and a predicate, as well as on the observation that they do not involve licensing of structural Case.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 provides background to the analysis. Section 3 presents a review of previous accounts of verbless sentences in SA and responds to them. Section 4 discusses the interaction between tense and word order and reveals the crucial patterns for the proposed analysis, which is presented in section 5. Section 6 presents an apparent counterargument and shows that it does not constitute a threat to the proposed analysis. Section 7 concludes the article.

2. BACKGROUND

This section presents the approach to SA clause structure, the morphosyntactic analysis of verbless sentences, and the theory of structural Case adopted here.

I would like to thank Diane Massam, Elizabeth Cowper, and two *CJL* reviewers for valuable comments on earlier versions of this article.