

A Phasal Account of Arabic Passive Constructions

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The main concern of this paper is to describe and analyze Arabic passive constructions within the most recent phase-based syntactic theory of Chomsky (1998, 1999, 2001, 2005, 2006). As far as I know Arabic passive constructions haven't been investigated within this recent framework. Describing and analyzing those constructions within Chomsky's recent phase-based framework will be of great significance to Arabic as well as to Chomsky's phase-based theory of syntax. Applying recent syntactic theories to the structure of Arabic will enable this language to assume its deserved position among the languages of the world and will attract the attention of more modern linguists to render more service to this distinct non-Indo-European language by studying different aspects of its structure. As for Chomsky's phase-based theory, if the structures of Arabic can be handled within this theory, then this will lend further support to the universality of Chomsky's phasal theory. It is also important to determine if there is movement involved in the formation of Arabic passives as is the case in English or not. Besides, if there is movement involved where does the moved DP land? Further, is it an A-movement or an A-bar movement?

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1. Introduction

Passive voice in the languages of the world, especially in English, has received a great deal of attention in the linguistic literature. There have been quite a number of studies that tackled this topic (Chomsky 1977, 1981; Jaeggli 1986 & Baker, Johnson & Roberts, 1989, among others).

As far as English is concerned I will mention here three major studies that have dealt with Passive constructions. The first study is that of Chomsky (1981:124) in which he considers passive not the result of a passive transformational rule as advocated in his earlier work (Chomsky 1977: 41) but the result of the interaction of two basic properties: the subject NP (DP) does not receive a θ -role in a passive structure and the object NP does not receive an Acc case. As for Chomsky (1981), passive is considered a case of NP movement within the universal Move α -module (cf. Ouhalla 1994:79). Thus, within the Government-Binding framework (Chomsky 1981), case assignment is withheld until the object moves to the empty position vacated by the subject where it is assigned Nom case.

In a similar fashion, Jaeggli (1986: 587) argues that passive involves the 'absorption' of the external role of the verb and it is prevented from assigning objective case. Jaeggli explains the two passive properties referred to above by assuming that the passive morpheme -en, since it is in the government domain of the verb, can receive objective case and θ -role. This forces the complement NP of the verb to move to subject position to receive Nom case.

Baker et al. (1989) have developed the idea proposed by Jaeggli further by considering the passive morpheme -en as an argument. As an argument, according to them, it should receive θ -role and case. However, the passive account proposed in the previous two studies does not fare well in the minimalist framework. Simply because the government notion, prevailing in the GB framework and under which syntactic operations including passive formation, is no longer functioning within minimalism. As a matter of fact, Chomsky (1995: 176) states that,

“the concept of government would be dispensable, with the principles of language restricted to something closer to conceptual necessity....” One more problem with the previous studies, especially Baker et al's where it is assumed that the VP determines the θ -role of the external argument; in the minimalist framework the light verb *v* (or a complex of *V+v*) determines this and the external argument is base-generated in Spec-*v*.¹

2. A Phase-based syntactic theory

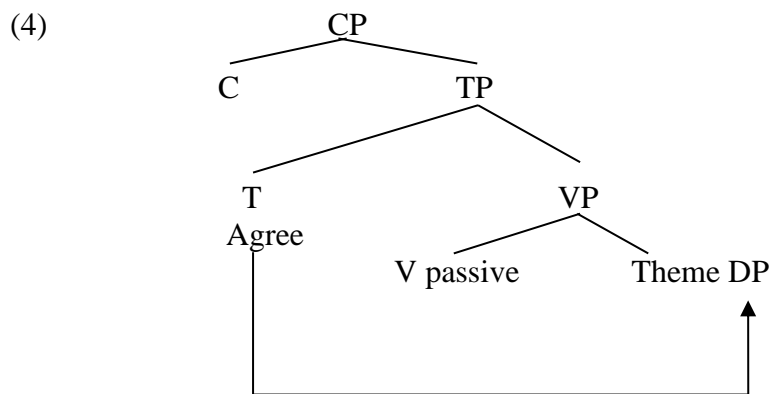
Before delving into Arabic passive constructions, I think it is only appropriate to present a brief overview of Chomsky's most recent phase-based framework. As is well known, Chomsky adopts the split VP analysis where a VP is split into two projections: an outer *vp* shell and an inner VP core. Following Rizzi (1997), he also assumes that even root clauses are introduced by CPs in order to express the force of the clause whether it is declarative, interrogative, imperative or exclamative. The introduction of root clauses with a CP specifier and a C head has not been a common practice in previous linguistics studies. Chomsky (1999: 9) also considers CP and transitive *vp* (which he denotes as *v*p*) as phases. His reason for considering CP and *vp* as phases is that CP is a complete complex with a force marker and that *vp* represents a full thematic complex with an external argument. He further maintains that C and *v* are phase heads and that syntactic operations involve an agreement relation between a Probe and a local Goal (Chomsky 1998, 1999, 2001). He posits that T and *v* are Probes which enter the derivation with unvalued ϕ -features (person, number and gender). When they enter into an Agree relation with a DP that carries a complete set of ϕ -features, their features are valued and deleted. Further, merger operations apply before any probing can take place. He also proposes that defective TPs² and *vps* that lack an external argument are not phases. This idea goes back to what has been known in the literature as Burzio's Generalization (1986:179,185) which roughly states that a verb which lacks an external argument cannot assign an Acc case and cannot theta mark an external argument.

Chomsky further assumes that probes can probe either simultaneously or sequentially with some choices converging while others crashing (Chomsky 2006:17). Further, when all syntactic operations in a given phase have been completed, the complement of the phase head becomes impenetrable to further syntactic operations which Chomsky (2001) terms the Phase Impenetrability Condition. His reason for why the complement or domain of the phase becomes impenetrable is that once the syntactic computation in a given phase has been completed, the complement or domain of this phase undergoes transfer simultaneously to the PF and LF components to be assigned the appropriate representation. Furthermore, the architecture of the clause structure in a phase framework can be represented by the following tree-diagram (modified from Radford, 2009:357):

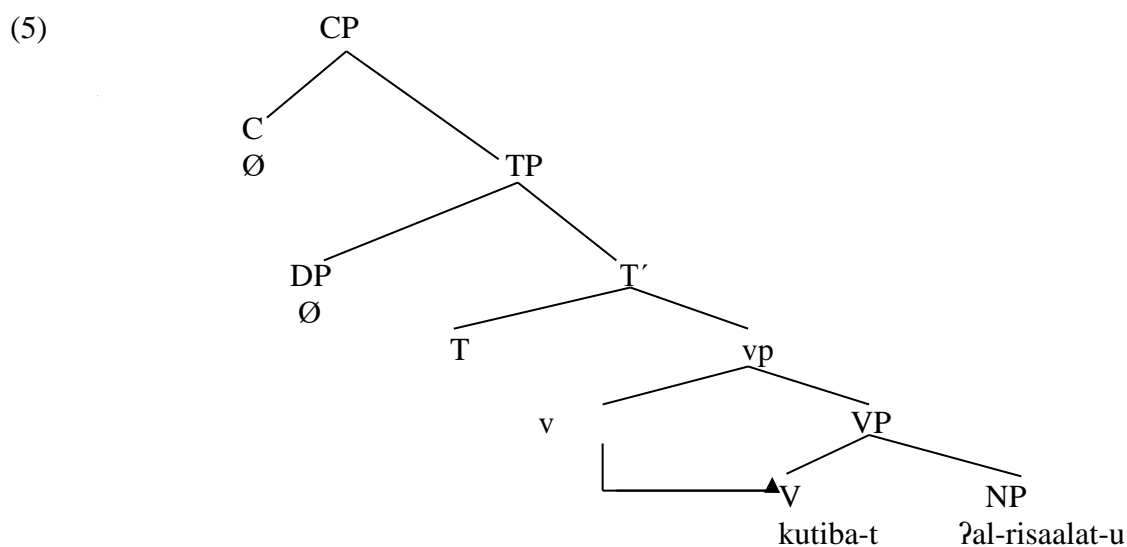
¹ For more on this, see Tucker (2007).

² Defective TPs are clauses that lack a CP layer like ECM clauses.

- (3) *kutiba-t* *ʔal-risaalat-u*
 written 3sg –fem the-letter-No
 ‘The letter (was) written’



However, this clause structure is not compatible with a phase-based framework as represented in (1) above and partially repeated below in a tree diagram:



In the phase-based framework, the light *v* in the tree above has no external argument; it has no agreement features, nor case assigning ability. Hence, it is not a Probe and there is not a *vP* phase. But since it is affixal, it triggers movement of the verb and the affixal *v* will add the passive morpheme to the verb, appearing in the PF as the perfective form (*kutiba-t*, ‘written’). The question at this point is: how does the NP *ʔal-risaalat*, ‘the letter’ get its Nom case and does this NP move or stay in situ? And if it moves; is the movement A-movement or A'-movement? The answer to these questions will be the topic of the following sections. But before going into these questions let me present a brief description of passives in SA.

Arabic grammarians have dubbed Arabic passivization, ‘al-mabni li-lmajhu:l’ (literally built structure of the unknown) or ‘apophonic’ passive. As a matter of fact, a traditional Arabic grammarian, AL-Astrabadi (1996: 28; quoted in Maalej 1999: 4) calls passive, “a verb built for the object whose agent has not been named.” In addition, passivization in Arabic is a productive process, i.e., any transitive verb can be passivized. Moreover, Arabic passivization is performed by a “melodic overwriting” (cf. McCarthy 1981: 399) in which the vocalic pattern of the transitive verb changes in one of two ways: If it is perfective like *kataba* ‘wrote’, it changes into *kutiba* ‘written’, i.e., a----a → u----i, if it is imperfective like *yaktibu* ‘write(s)’, it changes into *yuktabu* ‘written’, i.e., a-----i → u---a.⁴ Check more examples in (6) below:

(6) Perfective		Imperfective	
kasara	kusira	yaksiru	yuksaru
broke	(was) broken	break(s)	(is) broken
ʔarsala	ʔursila	yursilu	yursalu
sent	(was) sent	send(s)	(is) sent
ʔistaqbala	ʔustiqbila	yastiqbilu	(is) yustaqbalu
received	(was) received	receive(s)	(is) received
ʔakala-t	ʔukila-t	t-ʔakulu	t-ʔukalu
ate-fem	(was) eaten-fem	fem-eaten	(is) fem-eaten

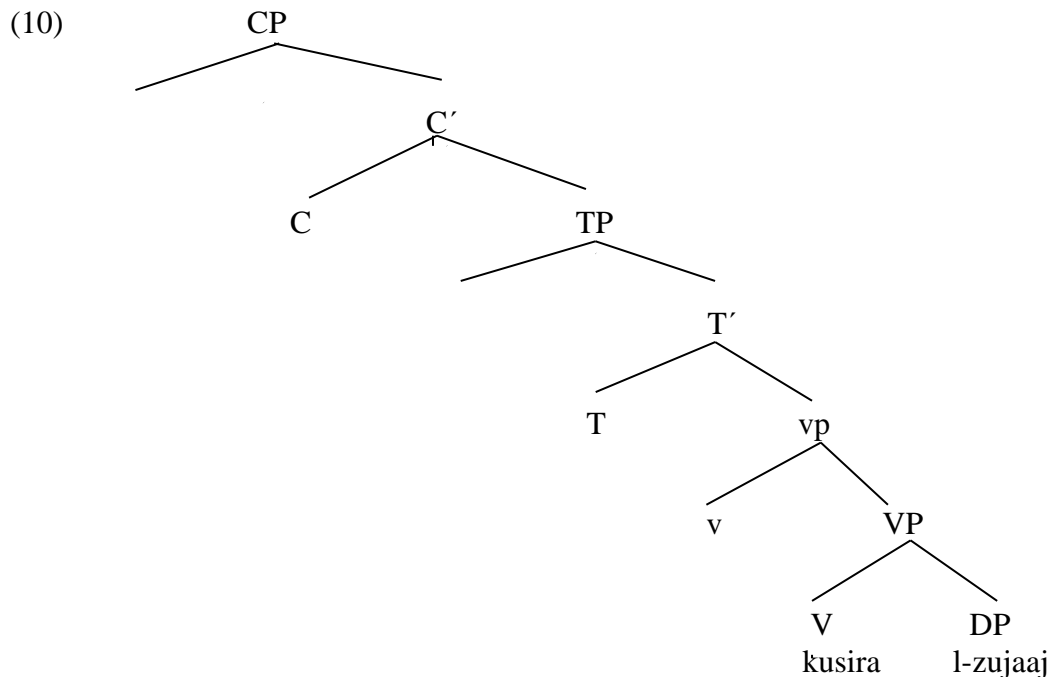
Having shown how the vocalic pattern of perfective and imperfective verbs changes from active into passive. We now move to consider some active voice sentences and their passive voice counterparts

It has been standard practice among Arabic grammarians to consider the (7a, 8a, 9a) sentences below as active voice sentences, whereas their (b) counterparts as passive voice sentences:

(7)	a.	<i>kataba</i> wrote	<i>l-walad- u</i> the-boy-Nom	<i>risaalat-an</i> letter-Acc
		‘The boy wrote (a) letter’		
	b.	<i>kutiba-t</i> written-fem		<i>risaalat –un</i> letter-Nom
		‘(A) letter (was) written’		
(8)	a.	<i>kasara</i> broke	<i>l-walad-u</i> the-boy-Nom	<i>l-zujaaj-a</i> the-glass-Acc
		‘The boy broke the glass’		
	b.	<i>kusira</i> (was) broken		<i>l-zujaaj-u</i> the-glass-Nom
		‘The glass (was) broken’		

⁴ Check Maalej (1999) for more on this.

relevant feature in T is the gender feature. The masculine agreement morpheme is null in SA (Al-Horais 2009:2). However, nouns with feminine gender enter the derivation with a morphological marker-t or they are lexically specified, especially with vocalic patterns such as *fa^claa?* (*sahraa?* ‘desert’) or *fu^claa* (*hublaa* ‘pregnant’).



As mentioned before, the light affixal *v* enters the derivation with no ϕ -features and no case assignment ability, (but with a passive morpheme which Chomsky names PRT, i, e, (participial, *ibid*) because it lacks an external argument. The T enters the derivation with unvalued ϕ -features, especially in this case the Gender feature and a Nom case feature. Now the derivation of the passive sentence proceeds as follows.

The verb *kusira* merges with the complement DP *l-zujaaaj* to form a VP and not a *V'* because as stated in Radford (2009:294), “it is a property of passive verbs that they project no external argument” The VP merges with the light *v* to form the *vp* and the *vp* merges with the T to form a *T'* and the *T'* merges with its Specifier to form a TP and the TP will merge with the null C marker to form a *C'* and the *C'* will merge with its Specifier to form a CP which is marked as having declarative force. Since the *v* is affixal in nature, it triggers the movement of the verb *kusira* to adjoin to it. It has been mentioned before that the *V kusira* joins to the light *v*, and gets its passive vocalic layer from the *v* as suggested by Chomsky. At this point it should be pointed out that the *v* has no ϕ -features to check and no Acc case to assign. The DP *l-zujaaaj* is in a complement position. Though the complement has a thematic role of patient, it has an agreement feature (Gender) and no case. Even if we assume that the verb enters the derivation in its root form (*k s r*) and in this case it can project an external argument because, following Chomsky, it will receive its passive morpheme after it moves and joins to the light *v*. The DP complement cannot move to the Specifier of VP because it will violate a Universal principle which disallows phrase internal movement. Boeckx (2007:110) formulates this principle as a constraint:

⁵ I have to point out here that this tree represents my own understanding of the passive clause structure; it might not be the standard representation of passive structures in minimalism.

(11) Antilocality constraint:

Movement internal to a projection counts as too local, and is banned.

Since *vp* is not a phase, the only active Probe available is T. However, T has unvalued agreement features, D-feature and a Nom case and the complement is in a position where it cannot receive a Nom case; it is a position of an Acc case. Thus the complement has to move to a subject position where it can receive a Nom case. The only position available where the complement DP can move into is Spec-T in (10) above. However, the DP cannot move to this position because if it does it will be in a position higher than the Probe T and an Agree relation cannot be established.

In the previous discussion I have argued that the null light *v* does not project a Specifier position if it lacks an agent or an experiencer argument. However, this does not mean that *vp* cannot project a Specifier position; it can. For example in English, Spec-*v* can be occupied by the expletive *there* (Radford 2009: 384) though *v* is not a phase head. I will assume at this stage of the derivation that the *vp* will project a Specifier position to cater for the complement DP to move into. It is the only landing site for the complement DP. Now, T, being active by virtue of having unvalued/uninterpretable agreement features and a Nom case, starts searching for a local active goal and locates the DP *l-zujaaj* in the Specifier of *vp* where an Agree relation is established and the features of T are valued and deleted, and the DP gets its Nom case. The complex V+*v* moves to the T node in order to satisfy its tense feature. The DP does not move to the Specifier of T and stays in situ, i.e., Spec-*v*. The question that might arise here is why the DP does not move to Spec-T.

There has been a vast body of linguistic literature on the position of subjects in VSO languages (Emonds 1981; Sproat 1985; McClosky 1986; Ouhalla 1994; Bobaljik & Carnie 1996, *inter alia*). However, what concerns me here is that traditionally the EPP feature which triggers the (deputy) subject's movement is considered to be lacking (or weak) in VSO languages which means the subject stays in Spec-*v* (Al-Horais 2009: 16). Another reason for the non-movement is that in VSO orders the agreement between the T and the DP is not rich (Fassi Fehri 1993), i.e.; it is not strong enough to trigger movement. As a matter of fact in our passive example the only agreement on T is Gender; Person and Number can be considered as a default case in this example. Moreover, if the subject is forced to move to Spec-T we will get *l-zujaaj-u kusira* which is an SVO order or a Topic *vp* clause. Of course, this will take us into a completely complex different line of analysis which is not within the main focus of this paper. Furthermore, Tucker (2007) argues that the subject in Spec-*v* should move to Spec-T even in VSO order. He bases his position on what he wrongly assumes three pieces of evidence. First, he assumes that the 'comfortable' canonical position for manner adverbs in Arabic is to the right of the subject. He cites the following example:

- (12) ?? *yī-dʿrīb* *l-wḍlad-u* *al-qaadi* *ʿadīdan*
hit the-boy the-judge often
'The boy hit the judge often'

He comments by saying that if the subject were in Spec-*v*, the adverb would appear in the position shown in (12) above (his own example), i.e., between the verb in T and the subject within the *vp* layer and adds but "this is not the case" and that is why he marks the sentence with double ?? to indicate that it is ungrammatical (Tucker, 2007: 27). In fact this is the

canonical position of adverbs in Arabic, i.e., they appear in clause final position. As a matter of fact, Fassi Fehri lists a number of Arabic examples where it can be seen that the ‘comfortable’ position of adverbs is clause final position. Consider the examples below:

- (13) *kataba* *r-rajul-u* *r-risaalat-a* *?amsi*
wrote the-man-Nom the-letter-Acc yesterday
‘The man wrote the letter yesterday’
- (14) *yaktubu* *r-rajul-u* *s-saaa’ata*
write the-man-Nom now
‘The man write(s)/is writing now’
- (15) *y-aktub-u* *r-rajul-u* *yadan*
write the-man-Nom tomorrow
‘The man write(s)/is writing tomorrow’ (Fassi Fehri 1993: 145)

It can be seen from the examples above that the canonical position for adverbs in SA is clause final position, contrary to Tucker’s claim. One more thing *‘adidan* is not a manner adverb; it is a time adverb meaning ‘many times’.

His second piece of evidence is sentential negation in Arabic. He, following Ouhalla (1994), tries to establish that Neg morphemes must be situated between TP and vp and brings in examples from Arabic dialects, not from SA, but the situation is completely different with SA. I quote here Fassi Fehre (1993: 166) where he states that, “Arabic Neg morphemes select a clausal inflectional projection, not a bare VP...” This means that Negation in VSO order appears in clause initial position and not as claimed by Tucker. Concerning his third piece of evidence which he calls ‘vp Ellipsis’, he does not fare any better. The dialectal examples he brings in are completely ungrammatical. Hence his argument has to be rejected. One final point to mention here is that although Tucker conducts his research within Chomsky’s recent minimalist syntax, he doesn’t adopt Chomsky’s phase-based approach. Hence; there is a theoretical difference between his work and mine.

Now, I go back to peruse the derivation of the sentence *kusira l-zujaaj-u*. After movement of the complex V+v to the T node, the whole TP (the domain or complement of CP) is transferred to the PF and LF components to receive the appropriate phonemic representation and semantic interpretation. At the end of the derivation, the remaining constituents, the null declarative C marker and its projection, the CP undergo transfer as well. The movement of the DP *l-zujaaj* to the Spec of vp is an A- movement because it is a movement from an argument position (the complement position) to another argument position (the Spec of vp). In this section I have tried to show how a passive clause in SA can be derived in a phase-based framework. I have also shown that movement is involved in the derivation of a passive clause in SA.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to describe and analyze a sample of passive constructions in SA within Chomsky’s phase-based framework of syntax. I have tried to show that the complement

DP of the passive verb has to move to Spec-vp in order to receive its Nom case. I have also indicated that the movement to Spec-vp is an A- movement.

This paper has also shown that Chomsky's minimalist phasal framework can be applied successfully to Arabic passive constructions which is very significant for both SA and the recent Minimalist Theory. I believe researchers interested in SA structures would greatly benefit from this study. Future research in this area would be expected to describe and analyze more complex Arabic passive constructions such as double object constructions in a minimalist phasal framework. Hopefully, these constructions and others would be the topic of my future research within the recent minimalist theory.

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