An Analysis of Verbal Case Markers in Modern Standard Arabic

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Abstract: This paper examines the phenomenon of Verbal Case and how its assignment interacts with syntactic and morphological processes, particularly in languages that exhibit rich case-marking systems. Through a detailed Minimalist Program analysis of verbal predicates, this study argues that the markers appearing at the ends of verbs in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) are not mood, agreement, nor tense markers, but rather Verbal Case markers. It proposes that finiteness on the Inflectional head (Infl) licenses the structural Verbal Case feature on verbs via an Agree relation, and that certain complementizers, such as lan, function as case-assigning particles. The findings aim to contribute to a broader understanding of Verbal Case within syntactic theory and linguistic typology, with implications for our understanding of language variation and universals.

Keywords: accusative, Arabic, jussive, nominative, syntax, verbal case

1. Introduction

This paper explores the nature of the markers that appear at the ends of verbs to provide a Minimalist account of how particular classes of verbs and nouns manifest inflectional features. Before proceeding, it is important to note that some of these markers (such as the genitive case marker, which indicates that the noun is in the domain of a preposition) appear only on nouns, whereas others, such as the jussive marker, which indicates that the verb is in the domain of certain particles, appear only on verbs. Yet some of these markers, such as the nominative and accusative, are shared by both nouns and verbs. This overlap between nominal and verbal markers has long posed a challenge for typological descriptions of Arabic (Bardi 2024).

This introduction raises several questions about the markers that appear at the ends of verbs in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). To facilitate the investigation, and with reference to the IPA symbols and abbreviations used in the Appendix, the following examples are presented:

1. a. *y-arkudˁ-**u*** *al-walad-**u***
3MS.PRES-run-**?** the-boy-NOM
'*The boy is running*'.

b. *y-arkudˁ-**u*** *al-walad-**a:-n***
3MS.PRES-run-**?** the-boy-DU-NOM
'*The two boys are running*'.

c. *y-arkudˁ-**u*** *al-muʕallim-**u:-n***

3MS.PRES-run-**?** the-teacher-P-NOM
'*The teachers are running*'.

d. *y-arkudˁ-**u*** ***ʔaxu:*** *al-walad-i*
3MS.PRES-run-NOM brother-NOM the-boy-GEN
'The brother of the boy is running'.

A close examination of example (1a) shows that the markers borne by the verb '*y-arkudˁ-u* / run' is identical to the nominative case marker *-u* borne by the subject *al-walad-u*. In (1b), the verb bears *-u*, resembling the nominative case marker, while its subject carries the nominative case marker for the dual *-a:n.* In example (1c), *-u:n* functions as the nominative case marker of the masculine plural subject, and in (1d), the subject is *ʔaxu:*, one of the five nouns.

As for the accusative case, the markers on DPs and verbs are illustrated in the following examples (2.a–e):

2. a. *ʔakal-**a*** *al-walad-u* *al-tuffa: ħat-**a***
3MS-eat-ACC the-boy-NOM the-apple-ACC
'The boy ate the apple'.

b. *ʔakal-a* *al-walad-u* *tuffa:ħat-**an***
3MS-ate-**?** the-boy-NOM apple-ACC.INDF
'The boy ate an apple'.

c. *ʔakal-a* *al-walad-u* *tuffa:*ħat-***ain***
3MS-ate-**?** the-boy-NOM apple-DU.ACC
'The boy ate two apples'.

d. *qa:bal-a* *al-walad-u* *al-muʕallim-**i:n***
3MS-met-**?** the-boy-NOM the-teacher-P.ACC
'The boy met the teachers'.

e. *qa:bal-a* *al-walad-u* ***ʔaxa:*** *al-muʕallim-i*
3MS-met-**?** the-boy-NOM brother.ACC the-teacher-GEN
'The boy met the brother of the teacher'.

The same pattern is observed with the marker *-a* which appears on the verb '*ʔakal-a* / ate' in example (2a) and its object *al-tuffa:hat-a*. In (2b), the object carries the accusative case marker *-an* as the noun is indefinite, while in (2c) it takes *-ain* as the object is dual. *-i:n* is the accusative case marker for the masculine plural object, as shown in (2d), and since the object in (2e) belongs to the five nouns, its accusative case is *ʔaxa:*.

If *-u* is interpreted as a present tense marker and *-a* as a past tense marker, examples (3-4) pose a challenge.

3. *lan* *y-arkudˁ-**a*** *al-walad-**u***
not 3MS.PRES-run-? the-boy-NOM
'*The boy is not running*'.

4. *lam* *y-arkudˁ-**Ø*** *al-walad-**u***
not 3MS.PRES-run-? the-boy-NOM
'*The boy has not run*'.

If *-u* is claimed to be a present tense marker and *-a* a past tense marker, the present tense exhibits different case markers in these examples. In (3), it bears a marker identical to the accusative case marker on objects, while in (4), the case marker is realized as the absence of the final vowel sound.

This raises questions regarding the nature of the markers that appear on verbs. Are the markers at the end of verbs in MSA agreement, tense, mood, or case markers, and how can a Minimalist Program account for case checking on verbs in MSA? The study further examines the validity of the claim that these markers indicate perfective, imperfective, and jussive moods.

2. Verbal case in MSA

The assumption that verbs in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) are case-marked is not new in Arabic syntax, as it was the prominent view of eighth-century syntacticians such as Sibawayh, Ibn ʿAqil, and Ibn Hisham, and was later adopted by Wright (1981). In his explanation of case on present-tense verbs, Ibn Hisham stated that *"present-tense verbs appear in the nominative case if not preceded by accusative or jussive particles"* (Abdelhamid 1964: 47).

The main motivation for this claim is that verbs in MSA display markers parallel to those found on nouns in similar syntactic configurations. This parallelism is evident in the correspondence between nominative case marking and indicative verbal morphology, and between accusative case morphology and subjunctive verbal marking (Loutfi 2025).

Traditional Arab grammarians proposed that the nominative case is the default form assigned in the absence of a case assigner. Similarly, they argued that the indicative verbal case is assigned when a verb is not in the domain of a case assigner. This perceived similarity between nominative and indicative forms led them to group both under what they term '*marfu:ʕ*'.

In addition, accusative and genitive cases are assigned to nouns in the presence of appropriate case assigners. By parallel reasoning, accusative and jussive verbal forms are assigned when verbs occur in the domain of specific verbal particles. Accusative forms are referred to as '*mansu:b*'. Overall, this framework led traditional Arab grammarians to posit a unified system of case assignment across both nominal and verbal domains.

In order to put this assumption into practice, it is necessary to consider the distribution of DPs as manifested in examples (5-6) and the distribution of VPs as exemplified in (7-9):

5. *We would like [that he/*him/*PRO arrives early]*.

6. *We would like [for *he/him/*PRO to arrive early]*.

Example (5) reveals that only *he* is grammatical because it is in a position where nominative case is assigned, being under IP. Also, only *him* is grammatical in (6) as it is in a position where accusative case marker is assigned, being under the preposition *for*.

Now, a similar examination can be applied on data from MSA. The data in (7-9) show that verbs in MSA share some features with the embedded English DPs in (5-6).

7. *lan y-alʕab-a /*-u/*-Ø al-walad-u al-kurat-a*
not 3MS.PRES-play-ACC/*NOM/*-JUSS the-boy-NOM the-ball-ACC
'*The boy will not play football*'.

8. *lam y-adrus-Ø/*-a/*-u al-ta:lib-u*
not 3MS.PRES-study-JUSS/*ACC/*NOM the-student-NOM
'*The student did not study*'.

9. *y-alʕab-u /*-a/*-Ø al-walad-u al-kurat-a*
3MS.PRES-play-NOM/*ACC/*JUSS the-boy-NOM the-ball-ACC
'*The boy plays football*'.

Mainly, only the verb in the accusative case is grammatically correct in (7) because it is in a position where the accusative case is licensed by *lan* which is an accusative case-assigning particle. Similarly, only the verb in the jussive is grammatical in (8) because it is in a position where the jussive case is licensed by *lam*. Likewise, only the verb in the nominative case is grammatical in (9) because it is in a position where the nominative case is licensed. In a sense, the relation between these verbal forms and the positions in which they are licensed is similar to the relation between the DPs *he* and *him* in (5-6) and the positions in which they are licensed.

The discussion now returns to the main research question: whether these markers are tense, agreement, or mood markers.

2.1 Tense markers

To investigate tense markers, the following examples are analyzed:

10. *al-walad-u y-aktub-u al-dars-a*
the-boy-NOM 3MS.PRES-write-NOM the-lesson-ACC
'*The boy writes the lesson*'.

11. *al-awla:d-u y-aktub-u:-n al-dars-a*
the-boys.P-NOM PRES-write-3MP-NOM the-lesson-ACC
'*The boys are writing the lesson*'.

12. *al-walad-u y-ara-Ø al-saya:rat-a*
the-boy-NOM 3MS.PRES-see-NOM the-car-ACC
'*The boy sees the car*'.

These three examples have present tense verbs *y-aktub-u, y-aktub-u:-n,* and *y-ara* where, in accordance with our assumption, the nominative case marker is realized by the *-u* in example (10), *-n* in example (11) since this verb belongs to a specific group of verbs in Arabic called '*The Five Verbs*'. Example (12) contains a verb '*y-ara /* see' which ends in a vowel sound. Here, the nominative case marker cannot be realized overtly due to phonological constraints, namely the difficulty of pronouncing *-u* after a vowel sound (Jawal and Bin Makhashen 2023).

The nominative case markers cannot be interpreted as tense markers, given that the preceding present-tense examples are not permissible in the accusative case, as shown (Alonini 2025).

13. *lan y-aktub-a al-walad-u al-dars-a*

not 3MS.PRES-write-ACC the-boy-NOM the-lesson-ACC
'*The boy is not writing the lesson*'.

14. *al-awla:d-u* *lan* *y-aktub-u:-n* *al-darsa*
the-boys.P-NOM not PRES-write-3MP.ACC the-lesson-ACC
'The boys are not writing the lesson'.

15. *al-walad-u* *lan* *y-ara-Ø* *al-saya:rat-a*
the-boy-NOM not 3MS.PRES-see.ACC the-car-ACC
'The boy does not see the car'.

Examples (13-15) above have present tense verbs that are in the accusative case which is realized by *-a* in example (13). While the nominative case marker is realized by the presence of *-n* in example (11), the accusative case marker is realized by the deletion of this *-n* as shown in example (14). Example (15) has the verb '*y-ara* / see' which ends in a vowel sound, which prevents us from realizing the accusative case marker at its end.

Present-tense verbs can also bear the jussive case. In example (16), the jussive case marker is realized overtly in Arabic by what is called '*sukūn* / absence of vowel sound' which is orthographically recognized as (-°). In example (17), the deletion of the final vowel sound from the verb marks the jussive case as the verb is originally *tamshi:*. The jussive case marker is realized by the deletion of *-n* in example number (18) just as the accusative case.

16. *lam* *y-aktub.Ø* *al-walad-u* *al-dars-a*
not 3MS.PRES-write.JUSS the-boy-NOM the-lesson-ACC
'*The boy did not write the lesson*'.

17. *la* *t-amsh.Ø* *huna:*
do not 2MS.PRES-walk.JUSS here
'*Do not walk here*'.

18. *al-awla:d-u* *la* *y-aktub-u:-n* *al-darsa*
the-boys.P-NOM not PRES-write-3MP.JUSS the-lesson-ACC
'*The boys are not writing the lesson*'.

Past tense verbs can also bear the accusative case as represented in example (19) which is the past counterpart of example (10):

19. *katab-a* *al-walad-u* *al-dars-a*
3MS.wrote-ACC the-boy-NOM the-lesson-ACC
'*The boy wrote the lesson*'.

The occurrence of present-tense verbs in three different cases, in addition to past-tense verbs bearing some of these cases, indicates that these markers cannot be tense markers. This argument is further supported by the fact that Arabic has a defined set of present-tense prefixes, namely *a-*, *n-*, *y-*, and *t-*, as exemplified in (20-23), respectively:

20. *ana:* ***a****-ktub-u* *al-dars-a*
I 1MS.PRES-write-NOM the-lesson-ACC
'*I write the lesson*'.

21. *nahn-u* ***n****-aktub-u* *al-dars-a*

we-NOM	1P.PRES-write-NOM	the-lesson-ACC

'*We write the lesson*'.

22. *al-walad-u*	***y**-aktub-u:*	*al-dars-a*
the-boy-NOM	3MS.PRES-write-NOM	the-lesson-ACC

'*The boy writes the lesson*'.

23. *al-bint-u*	***t**-aktub-u*	*al-dars-a*
the-girl-NOM	3FS.PRES-write-NOM	the-lesson-ACC

'*The girl writes the lesson*'.

The past-tense forms *katabt-u, katab-na:, katab-a* and *katab-a-t* lack the present-tense markers. The coexistence of these present-tense markers with the case-like markers at the end of each verb in examples (20-23) indicates that they represent two distinct entities. This is further supported by studies showing that Arabic case marking operates independently of tense and interacts with verb morphology (Oussellim and Ouchouid 2025).

2.2 Agreement markers

This section discusses whether the markers that appear at the end of the verb are agreement markers. To address gender agreement, the following examples are investigated.

24. *al-walad-u*	*sakan-a*	*fi*	*al-madi:nat-i*
the-boy-NOM	3MS.lived-ACC	in	the-city-GEN

'The boy lived in the city'.

25. *al-bint-u*	*sakan-a-t*	*fi*	*al-madi:nat-i*
the-girl-NOM	3FS.lived-ACC	in	the-city-GEN

'The girl lived in the city'.

Examples (24) and (25) illustrate instances of gender agreement where the verb in (24) is masculine with a masculine subject. In (25), the data shows that the verb has the singular feminine marker *-t*, agreeing with the preceding feminine noun. The verb therefore bears both an accusative case marker *-a* and feminine marker *-t*. Examples (26) and (27) illustrate subject-verb number agreement:

26. *al-walad-a:-n*	*y-askun-a:-n*	*fi*	*al-madi:nat-i*
the-boy-DU-NOM	PRES-live-DU-NOM	in	the-city-GEN

'The two boys are living in the city'.

27. *al-awla:d-u*	*y-askun-u:-n*	*fi*	*al-madi:nat-i*
the-boys-NOM	PRES-live-3MP-NOM	in	the-city-GEN

'The boys are living in the city'.

The verb in (26) contains the dual marker *-a:,* together with the nominative case marker *-n*. Since the noun that precedes the verb is plural in (27), the verb has a plural agreement marker *-u:* before the nominative case marker *-n* (Al-Bataineh 2024). As for person agreement, consider the following examples:

28. *ana:* *a-drus-u* *al-naħw-a*
I IM/FS-PRES-study-NOM the-syntax-ACC
'I study syntax'.

29. *anti* *t-adrus-i:-n* *al-naħw-a*
you.2FS PRES-study-2FS-NOM the-syntax-ACC
'You study syntax'.

30. *hum* *y-adrus-u:-n* *al-naħw-a*
they PRES-study-3MP-NOM the-syntax-ACC
'They study syntax'.

Example (28) above demonstrates that the verb is inflected for the first-person singular. In example (29), three markers are present: *t-* for a present-tense agreement prefix, *-i:* as a feminine marker, and *-n* as the nominative case marker. Example (30) similarly exhibits the markers *y-* for a present-tense agreement prefix, *-u:* for plural, and *-n* for the nominative case.

2.3 Mood marking

Bohas, Guillaume and Kouloughli (1990) and Plunkett (1993) argue that traditional Arab grammarians such as Sibawayh and Ibn Hisham analyzed the Arabic verbal system as consisting of three forms: past, imperfect, and imperative. In modern linguistic terminology, these forms are often associated with perfective and imperfective aspects.

Traditional grammarians distinguished between *al-mabni* 'the uninflected' and *al-muʕrab* 'the inflected'. Accordingly, the perfective verb in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is considered *mabni* because it does not inflect for mood, whereas the imperfective is *muʕrab* because it takes different morphological endings. They further argued that the imperfective verb has three forms: indicative, subjunctive, and jussive.

Wright (1981) proposed that the MSA verbal system consists of two forms: the perfective, which has one form, and the imperfective, which has five forms: indicative, subjunctive, jussive, imperative, and energetic (or emphatic). He was also the first to describe these forms as *"moods,"* a term not used by traditional Arab grammarians.

Similarly, Holes (2004) argued that MSA has four moods determined by syntactic structure, largely corresponding to Wright's categories. Traditionally, the indicative mood is marked by *-u* and used in declarative statements, resembling the nominative case marker (Ryding 2005). The subjunctive mood is marked by *-a* and expresses wishes, suggestions, or necessity, paralleling the accusative case marker (Ryding 2005). The jussive mood expresses negation and is marked by *sukūn* ('absence of vowel sound'), typically after particles such as *lam* 'not' (Fassi Fehri 1993; Ryding 2005). Likewise, the imperative mood expresses commands or requests and is also marked by *sukūn* (Ryding 2005).

3. The new paradigm

Having outlined the traditional view of mood in MSA, this paper argues that the markers commonly analyzed as mood markers are instead case markers realized on verbs. Accordingly, verbs in MSA, like DPs, bear nominative, accusative, and jussive case. A Minimalist account is proposed to explain how verbs acquire these markings, offering a unified analysis of verbal inflection in MSA.

Support for this argument comes from traditional Arab grammarians (cf. Ibn ʿAqeel (1980), as well as Benmamoun (2000) and Fassi Fehri (1993), who did not describe these forms as mood markers. Instead, they argued that Arabic verbs are inflected for nominative, accusative, and jussive cases. Traditional Arab grammarians used the terms *marfu, mansu:b,* and *majzu:m* to describe these verbal forms. Benmamoun (2000: 31) further suggests that the interpretation of these markers as moods reflects a European grammatical tradition rather than formal syntactic features in Arabic.

Another factor supporting this analysis is the overlap between verbal and nominal morphology in MSA. The imperfective verbal form parallels nominative case on nouns, the perfective parallels the accusative, and the jussive resembles the genitive (Bardi 2024).

Further evidence comes from the similarity between verbal and nominal case markers. Although verbs and nouns belong to distinct categories, both may bear the nominative marker *-u*. Consider example (31a), which illustrates nominative marking on a verb, and example (31b), which illustrates nominative marking on one of the five nouns.

31. a. *al-walad-u* *y-aʔkul-**u***
the-boy-NOM 3MS.PRES-eat-NOM
'*The boy is eating*'.

b. *d͡ʒa:ʔ-a* *ʔax-u:* *al-bint-i*
3MS.PAST-came-ACC brother-NOM the-girl-GEN
'*The brother of the girl came*'.

As native speakers of Arabic learn in introductory syntax, the verb '*yaʔkul-u* / eat' in example (31a) is analyzed as a present-tense verb in the nominative case, marked by *-u*. This analysis parallels that of '*al-walad-u* / the boy' in the same example, which is parsed as nominative and likewise bears the marker *-u*. Such parallels support the claim that verbs, like nouns, are inflected for case rather than mood. Indeed, Ibn Malik devoted a section of his *Alfiyya* (Ibn ʿAqeel 1980: 341-364) to verbs in the nominative, accusative, and jussive cases.

Furthermore, the indicative mood is not restricted to the imperfective form associated with present tense. It can also be expressed by perfective verbs, as in example (32), and by future-tense verbs, as shown in example (33).

32. *faz-a* *al-musha:rik-u* *fi* *al-musa:bakat-i*
3MS.PAST-won-ACC the-participant-NOM in the-competition-GEN
'The participant won the competition'.
33. *sa-n-usa:fir-u* *ghadan*
FUT-1P.PRES-travel-NOM tomorrow
'*We will travel tomorrow'.*

Also, the subjunctive conveys subjunctive and optative moods as well as other functions. Likewise, the jussive form conveys imperative and conditional forms besides other functions.

Furthermore, Fassi Fehri (1993: 82-83) claims that what Wright (1981) refers to as moods are not moods, but rather inflectional morphemes attached to the verb. Fassi Fehri claims that modality is expressed by using free morphemes as '*sawfa* / will' and '*qad* / already' which if followed by the perfective form of the verb expresses certainty as manifested in example (34a) and uncertainty if followed by the imperfective form as illustrated in example (34b).

34. a. *qad* *ʔakal-a* *al-walad-u* *al-taʕa:m-a*
already 3MS.ate-ACC the-boy-NOM the-food-ACC
'*The boy has already eaten the food*'.
b. *qad* *y-aʔkul-u* *al-walad-u* *al-taʕa:m-a*
already 3MS.PRES-eat-NOM the-boy-NOM the-food-ACC
'*The boy might eat the food*'.

Benmamoun (2000: 31) also argues that what are referred to as mood markers are in fact morphemes that mark the relationship between the verb, tense, negation, or complement. They do not interpret as mood markers or appear to have any semantic interpretations. The claim that these morphemes are mood markers stem from the fact that forming the verb includes the use of certain classes of temporal and syntactic contexts. For example, the subjunctive form occurs in future negatives as represented in example (35) and embedded clauses as in example (36); the jussive occurs in imperatives manifested in example (37).

35. *lan* *y-aktub-a* *al-walad-u* *al-dars-a*
not 3MS.PRES-write-ACC the-boy-NOM the-lesson-ACC
'*The boy will not write the lesson.*'
36. *y-urid-u* *al-walad-u* *ʔan* *y-alʕab-a*
3MS.PRES-want-NOM the-boy-NOM Comp 3MS.PRES-play-ACC
al-kurat-a
the-ball-ACC
'*The boy wants to play football*'.
37. *iftah-Ø* *al-bab-a*
2MS.open-JUSS the-door-ACC
'Open the door'.

Ryding (2005) notes that some particles precede the verb and affect its mood marking. However, she does not sufficiently distinguish between the conditional particle '*ʔɪn:*if' and the infinitival/complementizer '*ʔan:* to/that'. A significant distinction must be made between these and the particles *ʔɪnna* and *ʔanna*. Unlike *ʔɪn*, which assigns the jussive Verbal Case and can be followed by a verb or a noun, the infinitival *ʔan* assigns the accusative Verbal Case and cannot be followed by Subject-Verb (SV) word order. Furthermore, *ʔɪnna* and *ʔanna* are syntactically distinct complementizers that assign nominal case and should not be treated as parallel to Verbal Case assigners. Consider the effect of the infinitival *ʔan* on the verb in (38b) and *ʔɪnna* on the noun in (39b):

38. *a. y-adrus-u* *al-walad-u*
3MS.PRES-study-NOM the-boy-NOM
'*The boy is studying*'.
b. *y-urid-u* *al-walad-u* *ʔan*
3MS.PRES-wants-NOM the-boy-NOM Comp/to
y-adrus-a
3MS.PRES-study-ACC
'The boy wants to study'.

39. *a. al-bint-u* *ðakiat-un*
the-girl-NOM smart-NOM
'The girl is smart'.
b. *ʔɪnn-a* *al-bint-a* *ðakiat-un*
Comp/Indeed-ACC the-girl-ACC smart-NOM
'*The girl is actually smart*'.

The verb is said to be in the jussive mood when it is preceded by a negation particle as '*la* / not' as in example (40a) while in (40b) it is followed by a noun which appears in the nominative case:

40. *a. la* *y-aðhab* *Ali-un*
not 3MS.PRES-go.JUSS Ali-NOM
'Don't let Ali go!'
b. *la Ali-un* *musafir-un* *wala* *Zayd-un*
not Ali-NOM travel-NOM nor Zayd-NOM
'Neither Ali nor Zayd has travelled'.

Now, consider the following example:

41. *anti* *t-adrus-i:-n* *al-nahw-a*
you.2FS PRES-study-2FS-NOM the-syntax-ACC
'*You study syntax*'.

Example (41) contains three markers: *t-* for second person present, *-i:* as a feminine marker, and *-n*, which functions as a nominative case marker. It cannot be argued that *-u* is a perfective marker, since the verb is in the present tense, which corresponds to the imperfective in Wright's (1981) analysis. Moreover, *-u* cannot be

interpreted as a tense marker because present-tense verbs may also appear in accusative and jussive contexts.

Ryding (2005) treats the morpheme *-a* on past-tense verbs as a perfective marker, assuming it encodes tense. However, this is a partial view, since some Arab syntacticians argue that past-tense verbs may also bear different case-like markers, including the nominative, as shown in example (42a), or the jussive, as in (42b).

42. *a. al-awla:d-u* *nam-u:*
the-boys.P-NOM slept.NOM-3MP
'*The boys slept*'.

b. *katab-tu* *al-wad͡ʒib-a*
wrote-1MS.JUSS the-homework-ACC
'I wrote the homework'.

This suggests that *-a* cannot be treated as an imperfective marker, as Ryding (2005) associates it with the past tense, since past-tense forms may also bear other markers. Although past verbs are traditionally analyzed as *mabni* (indeclinable), these data suggest that certain past-tense endings can be reanalyzed as verbal case features. Within a Minimalist framework, such case features may be linked to finiteness and verbal morphology, supporting a data-driven account of verbal case assignment. Recent discussions of verbal aspect (Bagatin 2024) further show that Arabic verbal inflection does not map neatly onto independent mood categories. This supports an analysis of verb morphology in terms of case marking rather than mood alone.

4. Verbal case licensing

If the markers appearing at the end of verbs are not agreement, tense, or mood markers, and are instead treated as case markers, it becomes necessary to explain the source that licenses such Verbal Case features. This section proposes a novel account based on the concept of finiteness, located in the Infl head, as the primary licenser of Verbal Case on verbs. The discussion begins by defining finiteness, then presenting evidence for the [VC] feature, before offering a Minimalist account of Verbal Case valuation.

Many linguists have defined finiteness in different ways. Some base it on distribution, viewing a finite verb as one that *"can stand in a simple declarative sentence"* (Matthews 1997: 12). Others define it in terms of inflection, describing finite verbs as forms *"limited by properties of tense, number, and person"* (Huddleston 1988: 44). Both approaches treat finiteness as a property of the verb.

A third, more abstract approach treats finiteness not as a verbal property but as an abstract feature optionally reflected in verb morphology (Nikolaeva 2007: 4). On this view, finiteness is associated with a functional head, namely Infl (later T), which encodes finiteness in the clause structure. Following Nikolaeva, this study adopts the view that Infl is responsible for licensing Verbal Case.

It is necessary to reformulate the question as follows: Has the concept of finiteness ever been proposed as a criterion for case assignment, or at least been associated with it? The answer is affirmative. For example, Aygen (2002), in her

study of case and agreement in Turkish and other languages, links finiteness to the licensing of nominative case, while questioning the role of tense and agreement as licensing features in a Minimalist framework. Similarly, Sells (2007: 79), in his analysis of finiteness in Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar and Lexical Functional Grammar, argues that *"finiteness is considered to really be a property of a clause,"* and connects it to nominative case marking. This suggests that both Aygen (2002) and Sells (2007) are essentially referring to a licensing relation between finiteness and case. In addition, Pesetsky (2001) link tense and nominative case by proposing that nominative case reflects uninterpretable tense on T, while Benmamoun also observes that Classical Arabic expresses case on verbs.

Given that [VC] is not a common proposal in syntactic theory, few studies have addressed case on functional heads. This discussion focuses on proposals suggesting that certain functional heads may carry a [VC] feature.

Fabb (1984) extends Case Theory and the Visibility Condition to account for the distribution of modifiers, adjectival phrases, prepositional phrases, and verbs. He argues that verbs, like nouns, must be visible because they assign θ-roles to DPs. For a verb to be visible, it must bear case, assigned in a manner similar to nominal case: it is licensed either through government or affixation by a node with a matching case feature. In this view, the Visibility Condition is extended from DP licensing to verbal case assignment.

Fabb argues that Verbal Case is assigned by elements such as causative and perception verbs, verbal suffixes like *-ing* and *-en*, prepositions, AGR, do, and modals. These elements assign Verbal Case to the VP, which then percolates down to the verb. This case makes the verb visible. In the case of infinitives, the verb receives its Verbal Case from its governor, namely infinitival to, which carries the Verbal Case feature that percolates to the verb, thereby licensing it.

Although Fabb offers an influential account, his focus is on case as a requirement for θ-role visibility, whereas this study focuses on the licensing of Verbal Case itself.

While standard Case Theory (Chomsky 1981) treats case and θ-roles as distinct but related via the Visibility Condition, the MSA data on Verbal Case [VC] suggest a more refined distinction. A limitation of Fabb's (1984) approach is that it assumes verbs require case only for θ-role visibility. However, Arabic *ka:na* 'to be' provides evidence against this, as it exhibits nominative, accusative, and jussive verbal case despite assigning no θ-roles.

43. *y-aku:n-u* *al-walad-u* *na:ʔim-an*
3MS.PRES-be-NOM the-boy-NOM asleep-ACC
'*The boy is sleeping*'.

44. *lan* *y-aku:n-a* *al-walad-u* *na:ʔim-an*
not 3MS.PRES-be-ACC the-boy-NOM asleep-ACC
'*The boy will not be sleeping*'.

45. *lam* *y-aku:n- Ø* *al-walad-u* *na:ʔim-an*
not 3MS.PRES-be-JUSS the-boy-NOM asleep-ACC
'*The boy did not sleep*'.

Examples (43-45) show that Verbal Case in MSA is dissociated from thematic requirements, indicating that the licensing of [VC] is not tied to the verb's role as a θ-assigner. Thus, while nominal Case is subject to the Visibility Condition, Verbal Case in MSA operates independently of it.

Fabb further proposes that Verbal Case is assigned by elements similar to nominal case assigners such as AGR, V, and prepositions. However, the standard view of visibility (Chomsky 1981), which applies primarily to DPs, better captures the situation in MSA. Although MSA has multiple case assigners, only one typically co-occurs with a DP. This suggests that verbs and nouns have distinct case systems, involving two features: Case and Verbal Case, where only nominal Case is subject to the Visibility Condition.

Levin and Massam (1985) propose that Case assignment involves a linking relation between potential Case assigners (CA), which enter the derivation with a Case feature [+CA], and governed DPs. The two elements are co-indexed via government. In this analysis, a verb enters the derivation with a Case feature, which is then detached from the verb and projected to Infl, where it becomes CI(NFL) and can be assigned to the NP governed by Infl.

Although Levin and Massam rely on government relations, unlike the present study, both accounts share the assumption that verbs bear a Case feature and that this feature is licensed by an inflectional head.

In Levin and Massam's (1985) proposal, some verbs carry a [+CA] feature while others do not. This Case feature is then transferred to Infl and subsequently assigned to the DP governed by Infl.

In the present proposal, verbs bear a formal Verbal Case feature whose source is finiteness in Infl. Infl, as the head of IP, carries an interpretable [VC] feature that values the unvalued [VC] feature on the verb via Agree. When a particle is introduced in the derivation, it enters an Agree relation with the verb, assigning it a specific [VC] value. For example, *lan* is an accusative case-assigning particle associated with the ACC feature. This valuation process follows Agree, whereby Infl assigns [VC] to the verb only if the verb's [VC] feature is initially unvalued and uninterpretable.

Massam (1985) differs from the current proposal in that she assumes that the head of the CP has case features while the present analysis argues that the head of the inflectional phrase has an interpretable [VC] feature that is uninterpretable on verbs. Second, while Massam's case system depends on an agreement relation between the case assigner and the case assignee, the current proposal grounds case assignment in the finiteness feature of the inflectional head.

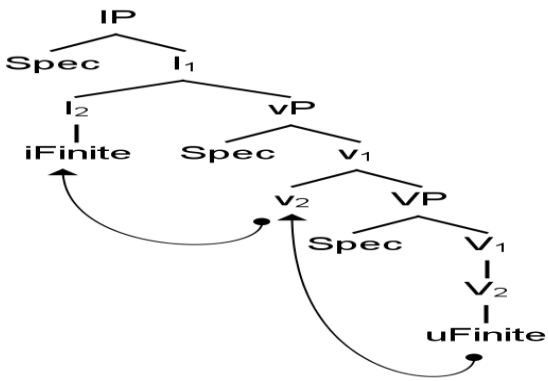
The present analysis argues that the inflectional head Infl, which heads the IP, has an interpretable feature [VC] that is, via Agree, values its unvalued [VC] feature on the verb. Upon the introduction of a particle in the process of derivation, the particle enters an Agree relation with the verb resulting in the specification of the verb's [VC] value. These particles have certain indices that specify the [VC] marker that is assigned *e.g.*, *lan* is an accusative case-assigning particle which has the feature '*lan* ACC. This valuation process is subject to AGREE, whereby for a

functional inflectional head to assign [VC] to the verb, the verb must have a valued [VC] that is uninterpretable on it.

Building on the observation that Verbal Case assignment process does not always demand the existence of a case assignment particle; we can infer that case assignment particles cannot always be considered the source of Verbal Case.

Now, given our analysis of the finiteness feature of the verb, it becomes reasonable to assume that this finiteness feature that lies on the functional head is the source of Verbal Case. Hasan and Wahba (2024) show that embedded subjects in MSA can carry nominative case, suggesting that the presence of certain functional heads (or their features) is relevant in case valuation. This supports the idea that the inflectional functional head Infl that heads the IP has an interpretable [VC] feature, which, via Agree, can value the unvalued [VC] feature on the verb. Given the observation that introducing a particle in MSA results in changing the Verbal Case marker from nominative to either accusative or jussive, as there are no nominative case-assigning particles, depending on the nature of the particle that precedes the verb. It is reasonable to claim that the existence of a certain particle is the source of these two cases on the verb.

As DPs in English receive case that is uninterpretable on nouns from the functional head v that heads the vP, it would be reasonable to build on this fact and assume that verbs in MSA have a verbal feature that is uninterpretable on verbs from the Infl functional head which holds interpretable VC feature on it. This means that the inflectional functional head Infl that heads the IP has an interpretable [VC] feature, which is different from the [Case] that is assigned to DPs, that is via Agree, values its unvalued [VC] feature on the Infl head as manifested in tree diagram (46).



46. *Tree diagram: Verbal case*

When a particle is introduced into the process of derivation, it enters an Agree relation with the verb, resulting in the specification of the verb's [VC] feature. These particles carry certain indices that determine the [VC] value; for example, *lan* is an accusative case-assigning particle which has the feature [ACC] Likewise, *lam* is a jussive case-assigning particle that has the feature [JUS].

Since Arabic has verbless sentences that consist of a Topic and a Comment, and verbal sentences where nominative, accusative and jussive are assigned, it seems that we need a condition that controls when case is assigned.

5. Features interpretability and value

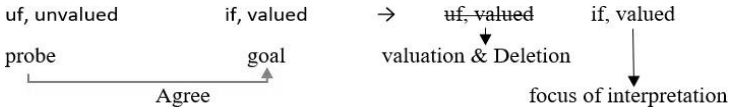
Formal features have two facets, interpretability and values. If a feature is interpretable, then it gets an interpretation at the interface level. Syntax can also determine if a particular feature is valued or not. In the process of derivation, if an unvalued feature is detected, an Agree relation is initiated and an unvalued feature starts searching for a matching Goal with a valued counterpart, so that the unvalued feature matches a valued one and gets checked. Thus, feature interpretability and feature valuation are two independent characteristics of formal features. However, it is broadly believed that there is a strong link between feature interpretability and feature valuation in such a way that a feature F is uninterpretable iff F is unvalued and vice versa. This is largely due to Chomsky's (2000; 2001) paradigm of feature interpretability and feature valuation.

This paradigm is challenged by Pesetsky and Torrego (2007), who claim that feature interpretability is different and independent from feature valuation. Example (47) presents the four plausible feature types.

47. a. *iF* valued
    b. *uF* unvalued
    c. *iF* unvalued
    d. *uF* valued

Chomsky's (2000; 2001) biconditional relation between interpretability and valuation permits only interpretable and therefore valued (47a) and uninterpretable and therefore unvalued (47b), whereas Pesetsky and Torrego's (2007) framework permits all four feature types. The feature types that are permitted by Pesetsky and Torrego (2007) system but excluded under Chomsky's approach are interpretable which can be unvalued (47c) and uninterpretable which can be valued as (47d).

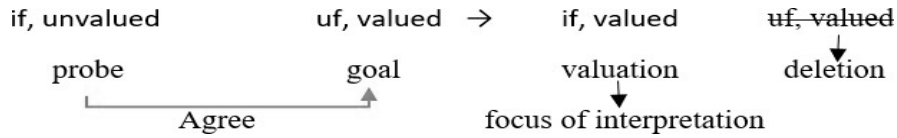
The next step is to outline the possible and impossible derivations that arise when all four feature types are permitted. To illustrate this, consider the first instance of an allowed derivation (example 48), which conforms to the feature configuration assumed in Chomsky's (2000; 2001) and Pesetsky and Torrego's (2007) framework. In this configuration, the Probe bears an uninterpretable and unvalued feature, while the Goal carries an interpretable and valued one.



48. Possible derivation 1

In this scenario, after the Agree relation is established, the Probe gets valued and deleted because it has an uninterpretable feature (by assumption c) whereas the Goal will be the focus of interpretable for the feature F since it is valued and interpretable. In other words, the feature F will get an interpretation on the Goal and not on the Probe.

Now, another possible derivation is presented in (49):



49. Possible derivation 2

Pesetsky and Torrego's (2007) analysis allows this derivation because the Probe has interpretable but unvalued features; whereas the Goal is uninterpretable but valued; therefore, an Agree relation can be held between them. Since the Probe is unvalued, it starts searching for a matching Goal, and since the Goal is valued, it can assign its value to the Probe. The outcome of this agree relation is that the Probe gets its feature valued whereas the Goal's features are deleted as they are uninterpretable (under assumption c). In this derivation, it is the Probe that forms the focus of interpretation for the feature F. To put it differently, feature F will get interpreted on the Probe, not the Goal.

One of the suggestions of Pesetsky and Torrego's analysis is that it gives both the Probe and the Goal a chance to get interpreted at the interface which Chomsky's system allows only the Goal to get interpreted. Now, notice that the two derivations in examples (48) and (49) above differ in terms of the focus of interpretation of the feature F. While the Goal constitutes the focus in (50), the Probe does so in (49).

Now consider some impossible derivations.

50. Impossible derivation 1

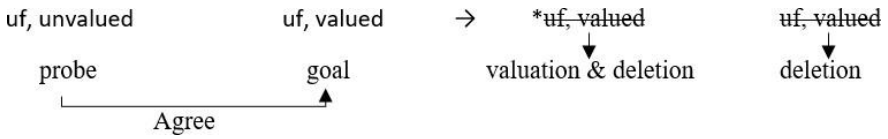
This derivation is impossible because when the Probe is valued, it cannot be considered a Probe.

51. Impossible derivation 2

The Goal has to be valued; otherwise, it cannot value the Probe's unvalued feature.

52. Impossible derivation 3

A feature must be interpreted either on the Probe or on the Goal, but not on both under assumption (d). Since both the Probe and the Goal have interpretable features, feature F cannot be considered a single focus of interpretation.



53. Impossible derivation 4

A feature must be interpreted either on the Probe or on the Goal, not on both under assumption (d). Here, both the Probe and the Goal bear uninterpretable features, Accordingly, the feature F will get deleted on both without being interpreted. Derivations in (50) through (53) will crash.

6. Features valuation process

The proposal argues that valuation is constrained by the operation AGREE, whereby a functional inflectional head can assign a [VC] feature only if the verb already carries a valued but uninterpretable [VC] feature. In this framework, the [VC] feature on the Infl head is interpretable yet unvalued, while the verb bears an uninterpretable but valued [VC] feature. The analysis further proposes that finiteness, expressed through tense or agreement, enables the inflectional head to host the [VC] feature. Additionally, certain complementizers function as case-assigning particles that determine grammatical case, such as accusative or jussive, depending on their nature.

The table summarizes features valuation and interpretation in Author's proposal (54):

Features value and interpretation

		Valued	Unvalued
Interpretable			I
Uninterpretable		V	

Upon the notion of c-selection (Chomsky 1995: 54) which proposes that each functional head has certain features that select its complement. This proposal assumes that the inflectional head functioning as a Probe bears an interpretable but unvalued [VC] feature. It selects a version of verb 'Goal' and values its unvalued [VC] feature via Agree. Now, to explain how this proposed analysis works, example (55) is presented:

55. *y-aktub-u* *al-walad-u* *al-dars-a*
3MS.PRES-write-NOM the-boy-NOM the-lesson-ACC
'*The boy writes the lesson*'.

First, merge the vP/VP and the subject in its Spec:
[vP Subject v^0 [VP Spec V^0]].

The presence of the verb '*y-aktub-u* / writes' indicates the presence of an IP projecting a nominative [VC] feature, which is realized by the *-u* on the verb. In minimalism, all features are present in the lexicon; accordingly, the [VC] feature would be merged from the lexicon as part of the verb's features. Therefore, this paper proposes that the verb '*y-aktub-u* / writes' originally has a [VC] feature on it, and it does not just acquire this feature through the process of derivation because such assumption violates the principle of inclusiveness, that demands that the outcomes of the process of derivation include nothing more than what is already there in the lexicon (Chomsky 1995:225).

When the verb *y-aktub-u* specified with a valued uninterpretable [VC] feature enters the numeration, it is merged in V with the object '*al-dars-a* / the lesson' as its Comp. Since *yaktub-u* is transitive in nature, it got merged in a vP. The external argument is then merged in Spec-vP.

[IP Spec I^0 [vP Subject v^0 [VP Spec V^0]]].

Since the verb is indicative and inflected for tense realized in *y-*, which we assume as a present tense marker, then this IP has a finiteness feature according to Pesetsky and Torrego (2007). Then, the external argument moves to Spec-IP to satisfy the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) feature of the functional head. While existing literature, such as Plunkett (1993), primarily discusses verb movement to Infl to derive VSO order in Arabic, the movement of the subject to

Spec-IP is necessary in this derivation to account for SVO word order and the licensing of the [VC] feature in this specific configuration.

[IP Subject I^0 [vP Subject v^0 [VP Spec V^0]]].

Next, as the verb is finite, an IP is merged with the vP. Given our proposal that the inflectional head has unvalued interpretable [VC] which lies in it due to the finiteness feature since they encode tense and agreement, the proposal here claims that an Agree relation is held between the inflectional head (Infl) as a Probe and the lexical verb as a Goal. To ensure compliance with the Head Movement Constraint and Locality Condition, the lexical verb (V) first moves to the light verb head (v) to form a V-v complex. From this intermediate position, the verb then moves to the Infl head, where the [VC] feature is valued and checked. This step-by-step movement ensures that no functional heads are bypassed during the derivation. In this derivation, it is the Probe that forms the focus of interpretation for the feature F. In other words, feature F will be interpreted on the Probe, not the Goal.

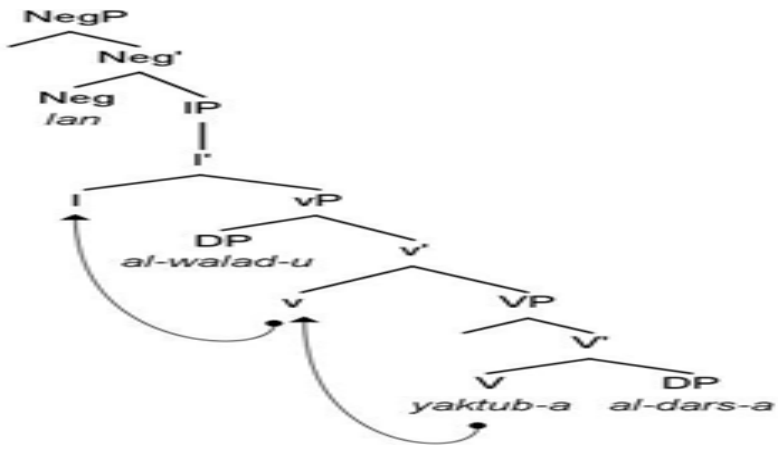
[IP I [iVC, unvalued] [vP al-walad-u [v' y-aktub-a + v [uVC, valued] [VP [V <y-aktub-a>] al-dars-a]]]].

Agree

But what happens when a case-assigning particle such as '*lan* / not' which assigns accusative case is introduced as (56) manifests:

56. lan *y-aktub-a* *al-walad-u* *al-dars-a*
not 3MS.PRES-write-ACC the-boy-NOM the-lesson-ACC
'*The boy will not write the lesson*'.

Above the previous process, the negative case-assigning particle is merged in NegP. This case-assigning particle has the feature [ACC] on it as represented in Tree Diagram (57):



57. Tree diagram: Lan y-aktub-a al-walad-u al-dars-a

The case has indices that dictate what kind of [VC] must be assigned, which '*lan* ACC' in this example. This NegP selects an IP as its complement which has an unvalued [VC] feature. Here, the IP which has an unvalued [VC] feature in it Matches and Agrees with V resulting in valuing the [VC] on the verb.

As for the nature of the case that is assigned, the verb is taken to realize the [VC] value associated with the particle, and in the absence of a case-assigning particle, the verb retains the nominative case marker.

7. Conclusion

Based on the data, discussion, and theoretical analyses presented throughout this study, the following conclusions are established regarding the nature of verbal inflection in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA).

The markers appearing at the end of verbs in MSA are not indicators of mood, agreement, or tense, but are instead formal Verbal Case [VC] markers. This distinct formal feature represents a special form of case that is realized on verbal predicates, mirroring the case-marking systems found on nouns.

The theoretical framework established here posits that finiteness on the functional head Infl serves as the primary source that licenses the structural [VC] feature in MSA. Within a Minimalist account, the Infl head that heads the IP possesses an interpretable but unvalued [VC] feature. This head initiates an Agree relation with the lexical verb, which serves as the Goal. Crucially, the verb is merged from the lexicon with a valued yet uninterpretable [VC] feature, ensuring compliance with the principle of inclusiveness. The resulting valuation process allows the [VC] feature to be interpreted on the Infl head while the uninterpretable features on the verb are checked and deleted before reaching the interface.

Finally, the analysis concludes that the specific realization of Verbal Case is often dictated by the introduction of case-assigning particles, such as *lan* or *lam*. These particles are identified as complementizers (Comp elements) situated in positions higher than the Infl domain. Upon their introduction into the derivation, these particles enter an Agree relation with the verb, assigning a specific [VC] specification based on their inherent indices - such as the '*lan* ACC' feature for accusative assignment. This demonstrates that Verbal Case assignment in MSA is subject to the nature of the verbal domains.

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Appendix. Transliteration key and glossing abbreviations

Table 1. IPA symbols and transliteration conventions

Symbol	Phonetic Description	Example (Arabic and English)
ʔ	Glottal stop	yaʔkul-u ‘eat’
ʕ	Voiced pharyngeal fricative/approximant	al-muʕallim-u:n ‘the teachers’
ħ	Voiceless pharyngeal fricative	tuffa:ħat-ain ‘two apples’
X	Voiceless velar fricative	xabar ‘news’
Θ	Voiceless interdental fricative	ʔal-θaqiilah ‘the heavy’
Ð	Voiced interdental fricative	ðahab-a ‘he went’
d͡ʒ	Voiced postalveolar affricate	d͡ʒa:ʔ-a ‘he came’
dˤ	Voiced emphatic (pharyngealized) alveolar stop	y-arkudˤ-u ‘he runs’
S	Voiceless alveolar fricative; used in traditional Arabic grammar to denote the ‘S’ variant in the term naśb (accusative)	nasb ‘accusative’
:	Vowel length marker / Long vowel	ka:na ‘was/to be’
∅	Zero morpheme/Null marker (*sukūn*); indicates the absence of a vowel sound, marking the Jussive Verbal Case	lam yaktub-∅ ‘did not write’

Table 2. List of linguistic abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Form
1	First Person
2	Second Person
3	Third Person
ACC	Accusative
COMP	Complementizer
DU	Dual
F	Feminine
FUT	Future
GEN	Genitive
IMPR	Imperative
IND	Indicative (realized as Nominative Verbal Case)
INDF	Indefinite
INT	Interrogative
JUSS	Jussive
M	Masculine
NEG	Negative
NOM	Nominative
P	Plural
PAST	Past
PRES	Present
S	Singular
VC	Verbal Case [Formal Feature]