

SYNTACTIC DEVICES FOR MARKING INFORMATION STRUCTURE IN ENGLISH AND ARABIC

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I. Introduction

Communication involves the sequencing of sentences into coherent messages. These messages can be described in terms of "information structure", that is how information is packaged in a text or how a message is organized in the sentence. The study of information structure is a major area of pragmatic analysis.

A language enables speakers/writers to organize a message in a variety of ways in order to achieve different communicative needs or intended meanings. It does this by providing them with alternative structures, each of which matches a specific message. For example, a speaker/writer who wishes to give more importance to a certain sentence element will have to select from among alternative options the appropriate structure that achieves the desired rhetorical or communicative effect. In sum, language provides speakers/writers with a choice of alternatives that can be used to mark or encode the information structure of the sentence. This choice is conditioned by what has been said in the previous discourse, what the listener/reader already knows and what the speaker-writer intends to highlight.

To describe information structure in different languages, researchers have posited some basic "universal" categories, such as Given and New, Information Focus, Theme, Topic, Contrast, and Definiteness (e.g., Foley and Van Valin, 1985, Finegan, 1994; Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1983, Jr. 1985, Tomlin, 1986; Rutherford, 1987; Downing and Locke;

1992, Lock, 1996). Finegan (1994:198), for instance, suggests that these categories “must be applicable to all languages” and that they “should be as independent of particular languages as possible”.

The purpose of the present study is to contrast the syntactic devices used by English and Arabic to mark information structure. Amongst the studies that have relevance to the present paper are: Bakir (1980), Agius (1991) and Fareh (1996). Bakir (1980) discusses word order variation in literary Arabic and information structure categories, whereas Agius (1991) documents the precedence of VOS over VSO in Modern Standard Arabic (henceforth MSA). Fareh (1996) is the only contrastive study that deals with foregrounding devices in English and Arabic.

Since the discussion will focus on marking the different categories of information structure, it is worthwhile to discuss them before the syntactic devices used to encode them are presented.

2. Categories of Information Structure

The following categories of information structure are discussed in this section: **Given and New Information**, **Topic and Comment**, **Contrast**, **Information Focus**, and **Definiteness**¹.

2.1. Given and New Information

Given and **New** information² are contextual factors that determine information structure. The former is shared information that is known to the listener/reader, while the latter represents the focus of the message. The principle of “end-focus” has been identified for characterizing information structure on the basis of Given and New. It states that, typically, Given information precedes New information. This principle provides evidence for the concept of “communicative dynamism”, postulated within the theory of the **Functional Sentence Perspective** by the Prague School of functional linguistics. (see Mathesius, 1975; Daneš, 1974) This concept states that a message progresses linearly from “low” to “high” information value.

Syntactically speaking, Given information is expressed by “definite” noun phrases, while New information by “indefinite” ones. The following sentence is illustrative of this concept:

The poem was written by an anonymous poet.

In the above sentence, the definite subject NP is Given information while the indefinite agent is New information.

2.2. Topic and Comment

Topic is another major category of information structure. It is what the sentence is about; it usually occurs in a sentence-initial position and typically coincides with the grammatical subject. In contrast, **Comment** presents what is said about the topic. Topic and Comment are equated in the literature with Halliday's (1994) Theme and Rheme.

Topic usually presents Given information while New information is expressed by the Comment. Consider the following exchange:

Q: What did Ali do?

A: Ali/He signed the report.

In the above exchange, the NP Ali, in the answer, represents the Topic or Given information while the VP signed the report is the Comment or New information:

However, a Topic may sometimes represent New information, as shown in the following sequence of sentences.

Government schools start teaching English in the
5th Grade. As for Private schools, they start in the
1st Grade.

In the above sentences, the NP Private schools is both the Topic and New information. Therefore, it can be concluded that Topic and Comment do not always coincide with Given and New, respectively.

2.3. Contrast

A noun phrase shows contrastive effect when it stands in opposition to another NP in the discourse. For example,

Q: Do you speak French?

A: No, my brother does.

The NP my brother is contrasted with the NP you that appears in the question.

2.4. Information Focus

Speakers/writers sometimes wish to give more prominence to a certain element in a sentence, which makes this element more salient. This typically achieves contrast or emphasis. The Focus is considered “newsworthy” by the speaker/writer. New information usually appears in a sentence-final position. This is called the principle of “end-focus”. For example, in the following exchange,

Q: Who signed the report ?

A: It was signed by Ali.

the Focus in the answer is on Ali, the Agent, who represents New information and appears at the end of the sentence.

2.5. Definiteness

A noun phrase is either definite or indefinite. It is definite when its referent can be identified by the listener/reader. In contrast, it is indefinite when the referent cannot be identified. Therefore, Given information is usually expressed in definite noun phrases while New information in indefinite noun phrases.

English has both definite and indefinite articles while Arabic has only a definite article. Indefiniteness in Arabic is marked by *tanween* and the absence of the definite article.

3. Syntactic Devices that Mark Information Structure

It has been noted above that the same propositional content can be expressed in alternative syntactic structures, each of which may be motivated by rhetorical or pragmatic factors. It is worth noting here that languages have several ways for representing information structure, major among which are: prosodic, morphological, lexical and syntactic. Prosodic marking of information structure is realized by stress and intonation patterns. Morphological and lexical marking, on the other hand, makes use of specific morphemes and lexical items, for example, to mark a Topic. Since the purpose of the present study is to contrast

English and Arabic syntactic devices used in representing information structure, only syntactic constructions will be presented.

3.1 English

In English, information structure can be marked by the following syntactic constructions or devices: **Passive, Clefts, Word-Order Inversion, Left-dislocation, There-constructions, and Extraposition.**

3.1.1. Passive

English has active and passive sentences. In the former, which has a SVO order, the subject is the agent, whereas in the latter the subject position is filled by the object of the active and the agent is either suppressed (**agentless passive**) or appears as the object of the preposition by (**agentive passive**):

The agentless passive allows speakers/writers to silence the agent and highlight another sentence element, either the semantic object or the predicate:

(1) The house has been demolished.

The agentless passive also allows speakers/writers to focus on adverbials or complements as in the following examples:

(2) They were sent TO PRISON.

(3) The letter was left UNOPENED.

(4) The house was painted BLUE.

In contrast to the agentless passive, a major function of the agentive passive is to place the agent in the end-focus position: cf.

(5) The letter was typed by the HEADMASTER.

In the above sentence, the agent the headmaster represents New information and is assigned end-focus. In other words, the agentive passive foregrounds the agent and meets the two principles "Given before New" and "end-focus".

Moreover, the agentive passive allows speakers/writers to place “heavy”(i.e. long) agents at the end of the sentence, which facilitates information processing:

(6) It was written by the poet who received the prize last year.

3.1.2. Clefts

English has two types of cleft sentences: it-cleft and wh-cleft. The latter is also called pseudo-cleft. It-clefting has the following form:

It + BE + Focused element + that-clause

This construction allows speakers/writers to achieve “thematic prominence” by placing the element to be highlighted in the focus position. At the same time, it backgrounds given information by placing it in the embedded clause. Clefts have two major discourse functions. First, they mark “givenness”. That is speakers/writers can highlight New or Given information. For example, sentence (7) below has three cleft variants, each of which highlights a specific element as New information. (The function of focused elements appears between brackets.)

(7) John called Peter yesterday.

(7a) It was JOHN who called Peter yesterday. (subject)

(7b) It was PETER whom John called yesterday. (object)

(7c) It was YESTERDAY that John called Peter.

(adverbial)

In the above three variants, the Given information is backgrounded by being placed in the embedded clause.

Second, besides marking givenness, it-clefts mark “contrast”. For example, if someone says that Peter typed the report, and as the listener knows that the report was typed by John, he/she tries to correct this misunderstanding by producing the following sentence:

(8) It was JOHN that typed the report.

The clefted element JOHN is contrasted with someone else who has been mentioned in the previous sentence.

In contrast to it-clefts, wh-clefts have the following form.

Wh-clause + BE + Focused element

Like it-clefts, wh-clefts mark givenness and contrast. For example, in sentence (9) below,

(9) What we need is MORAL SUPPORT.

the object moral support, which is New information, is made the focus of information by being placed at the end of the sentence. Sentence (9) also marks contrast. For example, if someone says that they need money, and the listener decides to contradict this statement, he/she produces sentence (9) to mark contrast.

The difference between it-clefts and wh-clefts is that the former can be produced without assuming that the listener/reader is thinking about the Given information that appears in the that-clause. In contrast, wh-clefts are produced when the listener/reader is assumed to have in mind the Given information that he/she is thinking about.

3.1.3. Word Order Inversion

Word order inversion is the third syntactic device that English makes use of to represent information structure. It can be described in terms of thematic reordering. Huddleston (1984:454) defines thematic reordering as a transformation that moves "an element from an unmarked to a marked position". It is achieved by either thematic fronting or thematic postponement.

Quirk et al (1985:1377) define thematic fronting as "the achievement of marked theme by moving into initial position an item which is otherwise unusual there". The function of thematic fronting is to assign end-focus to the most prominent part of the message: cf.

(10) This proposal the committee has rejected.

In the above sentence (OSV), the fronted object NP is Given information while the predicate the committee has rejected is New information that is assigned end-focus. The sentence could be produced in response to the following question:

(11) What about this proposal?

In addition to object fronting, the adverb may be fronted, allowing the subject to have end-focus: cf.

(12) Into the room plunged THE HEADMASTER.

The above sentence could be produced as a response to the following statement:

(13) The teacher plunged into the room.

In the above sentence, the response signals “counterexpectancy,” that is counter to the expectation of the listener. In other words, fronting achieves a contrastive effect.

In contrast to thematic fronting, thematic postponement involves postponing the focus to end-position. One motivation for this strategy is the placement of “heavy” elements in final position (end-weight) or assigning end-focus to it: cf.

(14) They painted blue **all the houses that were built in the city center.**

3.1.4. Left-dislocation

Left-dislocation is the fronting of a noun phrase and leaving in its place an anaphoric element that refers to the left-dislocated element:cf.

(15) John, I made him wait for an hour.

(16) The boy, he left the house at 7 o'clock.

The major function of left-dislocation is to reintroduce a referent into the discourse. For example, a speaker or writer lists names or objects and then decides to reintroduce a referent that has already appeared in the discourse in order to make a comment on it. For example,

(17) Yesterday I met three of my school teachers at the supermarket: John, Peter and Harry. John teaches us math and we all like him very much. Peter teaches us geography and always takes us out on field trips.

Harry teaches us English. John and Peter give us a lot of homework. But, HARRY, he lets us do all our assignments in class.

In the above text, 'Harry' is reintroduced in the last sentence, followed by the anaphoric subject pronoun he, creating a left-dislocated NP. Besides reintroducing referents already mentioned in discourse, left-dislocation creates contrastive meaning.³

3.1.5. There-constructions (existential sentences)

There-constructions are the fifth syntactic structure that is used in English to marking categories of information structure. They usually assert the existence or location of something. Their most common pattern is:

There + BE/V + Indefinite subject
(Focus, New information)

There-constructions have two major discourse functions. First, they allow speakers/writers to delay the introduction of New information until the end of the sentence, where it receives greater prominence (end-focus) and meets the principle of end-weight:cf.

(18) **There is a new cultural center being built in Bethlehem.**

In other words, they help speakers/writers avoid beginning a sentence with New information or an indefinite subject.

Second, there-constructions allow speakers/writers to introduce a list of New topics, each of which subsequently developed in the discourse:f.

(19) There are three major types of language learning styles: cognitive, metacognitive and affective. Cognitive styles are

In the second sentence in (19), Cognitive styles is the Topic or Theme of the section.

3.1.6. Extraposition

Extraposition involves moving a heavy finite or nonfinite subject that-clause or wh-clause to sentence-final position and inserting preparatory/empty it in its place. For example, sentences (21) and (23) below are the extraposed counterparts of sentences (20) and (22):

- (20) **That he should leave the meeting early** was surprising.
- (21) **It** was surprising **that he should leave the meeting early.**
- (22) **To protest against the new tax reform system** would be wrong.
- (23) **It** would be wrong **to protest against the new tax reform system.**

This process allows speakers/writers to assign end-focus to New information and at the same time it satisfies the principle of end-weight.

3.2. Arabic

Before we discuss the various syntactic strategies available in Arabic for marking categories of information structure, it is worthwhile to present some background information about the way medieval Arab grammarians and semanticists or rhetoricians dealt with the pragmatic aspects of linguistic analysis.

Medieval Arab grammarians concentrated on the syntactic motivation for word order inversions, namely *taqdiim* 'fronting' and *ta'xiir* 'postponement' and elaborated on the conditions for obligatory and optional fronting. They described these syntactic processes in terms of obligatory fronting '*at-taqdiim wujuuban*' and optional fronting '*at-taqdiim jawaazan*', placing very little emphasis, if any, on pragmatic motivations. They claimed that elements are fronted for relevance and interest '*al-'inaayatu wa lihtimaam*' but failed to explain why and/or when an item was considered relevant. This criticism was highlighted by Al-Jurjaani, a semanticist and rhetorician, of the eleventh century.

In *dalaa'ilu l-'ijaaz*, Al-Jurjaani added a contextual and pragmatic dimension to Arabic linguistic analysis. He treated fronting and

postponement in syntactic, semantic and pragmatic terms. He maintained that it is not adequate to claim that fronting achieves relevance or focus. He also emphasized that pragmatic factors should be used to explain word order inversions. Besides, he underscored the fact that any word order variation marks information structure in a different way, depending on the context of situation and shared knowledge or the expectations of the listener/reader. Furthermore, in his explanation of word order permutations, he emphasized the relationship between these and the rhetorical and pragmatic meanings associated with the different syntactic alternatives that realize these permutations. For a discussion of the rhetorical and pragmatic significance of fronting and postponement, see Ibn Jinni (n.d.), Al-Jurjaani (n.d.), Owens (1988), Al-Mallah (1993), Holes (1995), Fyuud (1998), .

Arabic exploits the following syntactic strategies to mark categories of information structure: **Word -Order Inversion, Passive and Free Relatives.**

3.2.1 Word Order Inversion

Arabic has a relatively free word order. Grammatical relations are marked by case endings. For example, the subject '*al-faa'il*' typically takes the nominative case marker and the object '*al-maf'uul*' the accusative case marker regardless of their position in the sentence. Since Arabic has both nominal and verbal sentences, word order inversions in each will be discussed in a separate section.

3.2.1.1. Word Order Inversion in Nominal Sentences

The basic word order in a nominal sentence is: TOPIC '*al-mubtada'*' ('*al-musnad 'ilayh*') and COMMENT '*al-xabar*' ('*al-musnad*'). The Topic is a nominal element while the Comment may be either sentential or nonsentential. The sentential Comment may be either verbal or verbless.

Word order inversion in nominal sentences involves fronting the Comment, which may be either obligatory *wujuuban* or optional *jawaazan*. The former is syntactically motivated while the latter is semantically or pragmatically motivated.

3.2.1.2. Obligatory Fronting of the Comment

There are four conditions for the obligatory fronting of the Comment, only two of which involve reference to categories of information structure. The first condition stipulates that the Comment must be fronted if the Topic is indefinite and the Comment is an adverbial or prepositional phrase. This satisfies the principle of Given-definite precedes New-indefinite.

(24) *fawqa n-nahri jisr-un*
 over the-river bridge-indef
 'There is a bridge over the river.'

(25) *fi l-jaami`ati muthaf-un*
 in the-university museum-indef
 'There is a museum at the university.'

It should be noted here that an indefinite noun may occupy a sentence-initial position if it is followed by a verbal Comment, as in sentence (26) below:

(26) *taalib-un hadara*
 student-m-indef he-came
 'A student came.'

In the above sentence, the indefinite Topic has a contrastive meaning. The sentence could be produced to correct a misunderstanding regarding either the sex or number of the referent. That is, the sentence could be used to specify that a male student came (rather than a female one) or that only one student came (and not two). In this way the above sentence achieves *taxsiis* 'specification' or 'particularization'.

The second condition stipulates that the Comment must be fronted if it is "restricted" to the Topic. This has been referred to as the rhetorical device '*al-qasr* or '*al-hasr* 'restriction'. The function of this device is to restrict an attribute to someone or someone to an attribute. This is achieved by either the particle '*innamaa* (but) or *maa ... illaa* (the negative particle *maa* followed by the exceptive particle '*illaa*). For example, if someone says that Ali is a poet, and the listener thinks otherwise, the latter uses '*al-qasr* structure to correct the former, which requires the fronting of the Comment. For example,

(27) *'aliyyun šaa`irun*

'Ali is a poet.'

(27a) *'innama š-šaa`iru muhammadun*

(27b) *ma š-šaa`iru 'illaa muhammadun*

'It is Mohammad who is a poet.'

In sentences (27a) and (27b), the NEW information is assigned end-focus.

(2) Optional Fronting of the Comment

The optional fronting of the Comment is another strategy used in Arabic to mark categories of information structure such as focus or contrast. For example, in sentence (28) below,

(28) *fi l-hadiiqati l-bintu*

in the-garden the-girl

'In the garden is the girl.'

the Comment, which is a place adverbial, is fronted to signal contrast. If someone says that the girl is in the house, and the listener decides to correct this statement, the latter produces the above sentence to assert that the girl is in the garden, not in the house.

(3) Assigning Focus in Yes-No Questions, Negatives and Declaratives

Al-Jurjaani discusses the pragmatic and rhetorical functions of word order in yes-no questions, negatives and declaratives.

a. Yes-No Questions

In yes-no questions, the element that immediately follows the interrogative particle *'al-hamza* represents New information and receives focus. For example,

(29) *'a-'anta waqqa`ta risaalata lihtijaaji?*

Q-you you-signed the-letter protest?

'Is it you who signed the letter of protest?'

In the above question, the subject (or doer of the action) is in question. In other words, it represents New information and is assigned Focus, whereas the action is Given information and represents a presupposition.

In sum, yes-no questions are consistent with the principle that states that important elements come first.

b. Negatives

In negative sentences, the negative particle precedes the element that represents New information. For example,

- (30) *maa 'anaa gašaš-tu*
 NEG I cheated-I
 'It is not me who cheated.'

In the above sentence, the subject or doer of the action is in dispute while the action represents presupposed information. The speaker denies that he/she is the one who cheated, and at the same time implies that someone else did cheat. In other words, sentence (30) signals both denial and assertion at the same time. Put differently, it has two underlying presuppositions

- ◆ I did not cheat.
- ◆ Someone else did.

This contrastive effect is marked by the positioning of the negator. Like yes-no questions, negative sentences satisfy the principle 'Important elements come first'.

c. Declaratives

In non-negative declaratives, the subject or doer of the action occupies initial position, thus achieving both *taxsiis* 'specification' and *tawkiid* 'emphasis'. For example,

- (31) *'anaa 'ukrimu d-dayfa*
 I receive-hospitably the guest
 'I extend hospitality to the guest.'

In the above sentence, syntactically '*anaa*' is the Topic of the sentence but semantically the doer of the action.

3.2.1.2. Word Order Inversion in Verbal Sentences

The basic word order of a verbal sentence is: VSO. In this sequence, the subject '*al-faa'il*' is usually Given information and the object New. The subject can be followed by an object, a complement or an adverbial. Information structure is marked by fronting and the passive.

(1) Fronting

In a verbal sentence, five types of elements may be fronted: objects, adverbs, prepositional phrases, circumstantial accusative '*al-haal*' and causative object '*al-maf'uul li-'ajlih*'.

(a) Object Fronting

Fronting of the object has been widely discussed by medieval Arab grammarians and semanticists. Two permutations have been identified: VOS and OVS.

FIRST PERMUTATION: VOS

The VOS order results from fronting the object to pre-subject position. It has three major functions, namely assigning prominence, marking contrast and highlighting the subject. First, in the following sentence,

- (32) *wajada kanz-ani l-fallaah-u*
 he-found treasure-acc-indef the peasant-nom
 'The peasant found a treasure.'

the fronted object is the center of attention and represents New information. The sentence satisfies the principle 'important elements first'. Relevance here is relative to the intentions of the speaker.

The second function of object fronting is to mark contrast. For example, in the following sentence,

- (33) (*'i*)*štarāa* *kitaab-an* *muhammad-un*
 he-bought book-indef-acc Muhammad
 'What Muhammad bought was a book.'

may be produced to correct a previous statement, such as:

- (34) (*'i*)*štarāa* *muhammad-un* *qalam-an*
 he-bought Muhammad pen-indef-acc
 'Mohammad bought a pen.'

The third function of this type of fronting is to highlight the object. For example, in the following sentence,

- (35) *kataba* *l-qasiidat-a* *rajul-un* *multazimun* *bi-qadiyyatihi*
 he-wrote the-poem-acc man-indef-nom committed
 in-cause-his
 'The poem was written by a man committed to his
 cause.'

the fronted object is definite, 'light' and represents Given information while the subject is indefinite, 'heavy' (i.e. long) and represents New information. These characteristics of the subject and object make the sentence satisfy four principles of the distribution of information, namely

- ◆ Definite before Indefinite
- ◆ Given before New information
- ◆ End-focus
- ◆ End-weight

It should be noted here that Arabic has another construction that highlights the subject by object fronting, namely '*al-qasr* 'restriction'. For example, in the following two sentences,

- (36) *'innamaa* *rawa* *l-qissat-a* *l-mu`allim-u*
 (37) *maa* *rawa* *l-qissat-a* *'illa* *l-mu`allim-u*
 'The one who narrated the story was the teacher.'

the subject is New information and is assigned end-focus.

SECOND PERMUTATION: OVS

Besides being fronted to pre-subject position, the object can be fronted to pre-verb position. This fronting has two major functions: signaling *taxsiis* 'specification' and assigning Focus. First, in the following sentence:

- (38) *qasr-an bana t-taajir-u*
 palace-indef-acc he-built the-merchant-nom
 'It was a palace that the merchant built.'

the verb is restricted to the fronted object. The above sentence could be produced to correct a misunderstanding about what the merchant built. Someone says that the merchant built only a small house, but the listener decides to correct this statement by saying that what the merchant built was a palace and not a small house. The above sentence satisfies the principle 'important elements first'.

Second, fronting the object in a yes-no question achieves a rhetorical effect such as denial or exclamation: cf.

- (39) *'a-fil-an ra'ayta?*
 Q-elephant-indef-acc you-saw
 'Is it an elephant that you saw?'

In the above question, the fronted object is in dispute.

Third, in the following negative sentence

- (40) *maa muhammad-an ra'aytu*
 not Mohammad-acc saw-I
 'It was not Mohammad that I saw.'

the speaker denies that he saw Mohammad and asserts that he saw someone else. This sentence could be produced to mark contrast.

Contrast can be achieved by fronting the object in sentences with the disjunctive particle *'ammaa* 'as for':cf.

- (41) *'uhibbu l-muusiiqaa 'amma l-ghinaa'a fa-laa*
 like-I the-music as-for the-singing-acc no
 'I like music, but singing I don't.'

The object *'al-ghinaaa'a* 'singing' is foregrounded by *'ammaa*, which marks both topic shift and contrast.

Finally, object fronting to pre-verb position can signal *'al-qasr* 'restriction' whose function is to assign *taxsiis* 'specification'. For example, in the following sentence:

- (42) *'ar-rasuul-a nusaddiqu*
 the-Prophet-acc we-believe-in
 'It is the prophet that we trust.'

the fronting of the object achieves *taxsiis*, which means that our trust is restricted to the Prophet.

(b) Fronting of Other Sentence Elements

Besides object fronting, Arabic allows the fronting of adverbials, prepositional phrases, the circumstantial accusative *'al-haal* and causative object *'al-maf'uulu li-'ajlih*. Fronting here achieve 'specification' of the fronted elements.

◆ Adverbial phrase:

- (43) *'amaama l-madrasati jalasnaa*
 in-front-of the-school sat-we
 'It is in front of the school that we sat,'

◆ Prepositional phrase

- (44) *bi-l-qasri marartu*
 by-the-palace passed-I
 'It is by the palace that I passed.'

◆ Circumstantial accusative

- (45) *maashiyan ji'tu*
 walking came-I
 'Walking I came.'

◆ **Causative object**

- (46) *'iftiraaman laka hadar-tu*
 out-of-respect to-you came-I
 'It is out of respect for you that I came.'

Besides being fronted to initial position, a prepositional phrase may be fronted to pre-subject position.

- (47) *yal`abu fi l-hadiiqati ba`du s-sibyati*
 play in the-garden some the-boys
 'There are some boys playing in the garden.'

The sentence may be produced in response to the following question,

- (48) *man yal`abu fi l-hadiiqati?*
 who play in the-garden?
 'Who is playing in the garden?'

In sentence (47) above, the prepositional phrase includes a definite NP and represents Given information while the subject is indefinite and represents New information. The response satisfies two principles: definite precedes indefinite and end-focus.

3.2.2. Passive

Word order variation in passive constructions typically appears in the forms: VS, VSO, VOS, VAS. The major functions of the passive are: to highlight the verb, assign end-focus to the semantic object, mark givenness and achieve thematic progression. Consider the following example:

- (49) *'as-suurat-u suriqat*
 the-picture-NOM stolen-PASS
 'The picture was stolen.'

The above sentence is a nominal sentence since it begins with the Topic. The Topic is Given information and the verb is NEW information and receives end-focus. The sentence could be produced in response to the following question:

- (50) Q: *maaḏaa ḥasala li-s-suurati?*
What happened to the picture?

However, if the question were

- (51) Q: *maaḏaa suriqa?*
'What was stolen?'

the response would be:

- (52) *suriqat suurat-un*
stolen-PASS picture-indef
'A picture was stolen.'

In the above response, the verb is Given information while the subject is New and receives end-focus.

Besides its use to foreground the verb or the semantic object, the passive can be used to achieve thematic progression, i.e, topic-continuity.

- (53) *wasalati r-risaalatu wa-tubi`at*
arrived-F the-letter-nom and-then-typed-PASS
'The letter arrived and was typed at once.'

In the above compound sentence, the selection of the passive in the second clause is motivated by the desire to focus on the verb and retain the same grammatical subject in successive clauses. The NP '*ar-rissalatu*' is the grammatical subject of both clauses, although it is ellipsed in the second.

3.2.3. Free Relatives

A free relative clause in Arabic has no antecedent NP. Arabic uses this clefting structure to assign Focus to a certain sentence element. For example, if someone produces the following sentence,

- (54) *baa`a muhammad-uni l-bayt-a*
he-sold Mohammad-nom the-house-acc
'Mohammad sold the house.'

and the listener knows that Ali is the one who sold the house, the listener would produce sentence (55) below to correct this misunderstanding.

- (55) *'allaḍii baa`a l-bayta `aliyyun*
who he-sold the house Ali
'The one who sold the house is ALI.'

Sentence (55) has another variant.

- (56) *`aliyyun huwa llaḍii baa`a l-bayta*
Ali he who he-sold the-house
'It's ALI who sold the house.'

In sentences (55) and (56) the doer of the action (Ali) represents the Focus of information. In the former it functions as Comment while in the latter it functions as Topic and the Comment is realized by a full relative clause.

4. Conclusion

The above discussion surveyed the most common syntactic strategies employed by Arabic and English to mark categories of information structure, such as given and new information, topic, contrast, information focus and definiteness. On the basis of this survey, the following contrastive statements can be made.

First, generally speaking, English exploits a variety of syntactic structures to achieve this goal. Among these are passives, clefts, word order inversion, left-dislocation, there-constructions and extraposition. Arabic, in contrast, exploits word order inversions, passives and free relatives.

Second, since English has a very limited inflectional system, this places heavy constraints on word order inversions. In fact the grammatical status of subjects and objects is conditioned by the sequential order of these sentence elements. This explains why English offers very little choice in the possibilities available for reordering sentence elements. In other words, English exhibits a fairly fixed SV(O) order. Arabic, in contrast, has a rich inflectional system that allows for a great variety of word order permutations, each of which can be used for encoding the information structure of the sentence or sequences of sentences. This mobility of

elements provides speakers/writers with a number of syntactic alternatives for achieving the intended pragmatic effect.

Third, with regard to encoding the information structure category of Focus, English exploits the passive, clefts and there-constructions. For example, since English, unlike Arabic, has both agentive and agentless passives, the Agent can be assigned Focus by selecting the agentive passive. Arabic, on the other hand, can highlight the Agent by word order inversion and the rhetorical device '*al-qasr*', which signals *taxsiis* 'specification' and *tawkiid* 'emphasis'. Put differently, whereas English achieves Focus by means of specific syntactic devices, Arabic can achieve Focus by merely moving sentence elements, e.g., shifting an element to sentence-initial or sentence-final position. Moreover, Arabic can assign Focus by means of the positioning of a certain element immediately after the yes-no question particle '*al-hamza*' and the negative particle *maa*, as well as by moving an element to sentence-initial position in declaratives.

Fourth, English marks contrast mainly by means of the two different syntactic constructions of clefting and left-dislocation. Arabic, on the other hand, marks contrast by word-order inversion (i.e., fronting), the use of the functional particle '*ammaa ... fa*', or by free relatives.

Fifth, the major function of fronting in English is to encode 'givenness'. That is, fronted elements represent Given information. However, in Arabic, the major function of fronting is to highlight New information.

In conclusion, English and Arabic generally exploit different syntactic devices for marking categories of information structure. Whereas English exploits a number of syntactic constructions to achieve this goal, Arabic uses word order inversions, passive, free relatives and functional particles. The mobility of sentence elements in Arabic enables speakers/writers to exploit word order permutations extensively to mark information structure. In contrast, the heavy constraints imposed on word order permutations in English are compensated for by a variety of syntactic constructions that enable speakers/writers to mark information structure.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following colleagues for their help and advice during the preparation of the final version of this article: Yasir Al-Mallah, Mahmoud Abu-Kitteh and Hazim Najjar. The article is a revised version of a paper presented at the First International Conference on English/Arabic Contrastive and Comparative Studies, held at the University of Jordan, 23-27 August, 1997.

Notes

1. Strictly speaking these are terms/labels used to describe/characterize information structure in utterances or sentences.
2. "Given and New Information" is to be distinguished from the labels "Given" and "New", which are descriptive terms utilized in analyzing information structure.
3. Notice also that CONTRAST is achieved by the use of but, not only by left-dislocation.

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