

Nasser Al-Horais. - *Arabic verbless sentences: is there a null VP?*

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# ARABIC VERBLESS SENTENCES: IS THERE A NULL VP<sup>1</sup>?

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## Resumen

Este trabajo pretende describir y analizar el fenómeno de la ausencia de verbo copulativo en tiempo presente en las oraciones sin verbo en árabe. Por regla general, se asume que, en árabe, las oraciones sin verbo contienen un verbo copulativo nulo o elidido. Este estudio rebate dicho supuesto y propone que, en consonancia con las bases de la sintaxis minimalista (expresadas inicialmente en Chomsky 1993, 1995), las oraciones sin verbo revelan ausencia de V y, por lo tanto, de VP. La razón es que la estructura objeto de estudio presenta dos posibilidades para expresar el tiempo presente: una mediante la ausencia de verbo, y otra que conlleva la presencia de verbo copulativo con flexión de tiempo.

**Palabras clave:** oración sin verbo, verbo copulativo nulo, predicación, caso.

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to describe and analyze the absence of present tense verbal copula in Arabic verbless sentences. The Standard assumption is that Arabic verbless sentences contain a null or deleted copula. The present study argues contra this assumption. It proposes, building on the framework of minimalist syntax (first proposed by Chomsky 1993, 1995), that there is no V and hence no VP in verbless sentences since the relevant construction has two alternatives to express the present tense interpretation: one is achieved without a verb and the other with a verb (copula) inflected for tense.

**Keywords:** Verbless sentence, null copula, predication, Case.

## Résumé

Le but de cet exposé est de décrire et d'examiner l'absence des verbes de connexion dans les phrases arabiques sans verbes. La supposition habituelle est que les phrase arabiques contiennent un verbe de connexion insignifiant ou supprimé. Les études récentes sont contre cette supposition. Ils suggèrent, en se basant sur le cadre de la syntaxe minimaliste (d'abord avancé par Chomsky 1993, 1995) qu'il n'y a pas de V et donc de VP dans les phrases sans verbes, car la construction approprié a deux façon alternatives d'exprimer l'interprétation du temps au present. L'un est accompli sans le verbe et l'autre avec un verbe infléchi pour le temps.

**Mots clés:** Phrase sans verbes, verbes de connexion insignifiant, prédication, cas.

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## Summary

1. Introduction. 2. The structure of verbless sentences. 2.1. Predication in verbless sentences. 2.2. Case and Agreement in Verbless Sentences. 3. The deep structure of verbless sentences. 3.1. Abstract functional category in verbless sentences. 4. Copula and verbless sentences. 5. Discussion. 6. Conclusion.

## 1. Introduction

Verbless sentences are considered to be one of the significant characteristics of the Arabic language syntax. The verbless sentence can be defined as a sentence with the absence of an overt verbal copula in the present tense (1) (Benmamoun 2000). In Arabic syntax, this kind of sentence is considered to be a part of what is called by early Arab grammarians *al-Jomlah al-Esmeiah* ‘the Nominal Sentence’ (Sibawayh/796- AD, 1977).

- (1) ahmad-u                      mu’aallim-un  
 Ahmad-Nom                    teacher -Nom  
 “Ahmad is a teacher.”

Given the example (1), we can see the absence of an overt verbal copula in the present tense. However, the case in the past and future tense seems different (Bakir 1980; Fassi Fehri 1993 and Benmamoun 2000). The presence of an overt verbal copula is obligatory (2).

- (2) a. ahmad-u                    kana            huna            ?amsi  
 Ahmad-Nom                    be.past        here            yesterday  
 “Ahmad was here yesterday.”  
 b. \*ahmad-u                    huna            'amsi  
 Ahmad-Nom                    here            yesterday
- (3) a. sa-yakounu    l-hall-u                    jaahiz-an        ghadan  
 FUT-be                    the-solution-Nom    ready-Acc        tomorrow  
 “The solution will be ready tomorrow.”  
 b. \* al-hall-u                    jaahiz-un        ghadan  
 the-solution-Nom            ready-Nom        tomorrow

However, Arabic present tense copular constructions display an interesting set of works produced by a number of Arab and western grammarians. One of the earliest and most complete studies of Arabic grammar was done by Sibawayh<sup>2</sup> in his outstanding work known as *al-Kitab* ‘the book’. This work still dominates Arabic linguistic thinking today. The early Arab grammarians, who came after Sibawayh such as Ibn Jinni (1010- AD,

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<sup>2</sup> He was born in southern Persia in a small town called al-Bayda. There is no agreement about the year of his birth, nor his death, although in all probability he died in c. 180 AH (796 AD) at the age of about forty-five (Al-Nassir 1993: 4).

1993), Abo Hian (1377- AD, 2001) and Ibn Hesham (1590- AD, 1994), repeated what Sibawayh said about the structure of verbless sentences and added some observations.

At present, several grammarians have attempted to study Arabic verbless sentences from various perspectives, e.g., classical Arabic (CA), Modern standard Arabic (MSA), and dialectal variants around the Arab world (Bakir, 1980; Fassi Fehri, 1993 and Benmamoun, 2000). Others compared it with the structure of verbless sentences in various languages that have this kind of sentence, such as Hebrew (Eid 1991; Falk 2004). Briefly, the difference, which will be explained in more detail later, between the old and new studies of Arabic verbless sentences, is that early Arab grammarians claimed that in these sentences, there is no V and hence no VP (Sibawayh 1977). It has a particular structure as it only contains a subject and predicate, while most modern Arab grammarians such as Bakir (1980), Fassi Fehri (1993) and Bahloul (1993) argue that there is a copula in verbless sentences but it is not overt. This argument mainly relies on some analyses which have suggested, after considering this kind of construction in some languages e.g., Hebrew (Falk 2004) Russian (Babby 1981) and in some dialects of African-American English (Labov 1995) that present tense copulative sentences contain a null verbal copula. To the best of my knowledge, none of these studies, old or new, have discussed in more depth the Arabic sentence with the verb /ya-kuun/ 'is' which is the present form of the copula /kan/ 'was' as in (4). It is very important to underline the fact that Arabic is the only language that has the present tense copular form among languages that have the verbless sentences constructions (see Eid 1991: 34).

- (4) ya-kuunu al-jaww-u                      haarr-an    fii    SSayf-i  
 PRES-be the-weather-Nom                hot-Acc    in    the-summer-Gen  
 "The weather is hot in the summer." (Benmamoun 2000: 47).

In looking closely at the above example, one may argue that Arabic has two alternatives regarding verbless sentences in the present tense: one that deletes the copula or does not have it and one that pronounces it.

Within the framework of Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995), this paper aims to discuss this suggestion and the claim that there is a null V or VP in Arabic verbless sentences with the present tense. However, before coming to the actual analysis of that, I shall give, in the next section, a brief accurate picture of the structure of the Arabic verbless sentence from different syntactic aspects.

## 2. The structure of verbless sentences

From the preceding data, it is clear that verbless sentences do not necessarily need any element other than a subject and a simple predicate for their construction. As for the subject, it must be definite. Thus, (5) is an ill-formed sentence:

- (5) \*walad-un    fii    l-ghurfat-i  
 boy-Nom    in    the-room-Gen  
 "A boy is in the room."

In order to make the (5) a well-formed sentence, the NP “walad-un” must be definite by *al* “the” as in (6) or by a definite possessor as in (7):

- (6) al-walad-u      fii   l-ghorfat-i  
the-boy-Nom    in    the-room-Gen  
“The boy is in the room.”
- (7) walad-u            khalid-in            fii   l-ghorfat-i  
boy-Nom            khalid-Gen            in    the-room-Gen  
“Khalid’s boy is in the room.”

If the initial position is occupied by an indefinite NP, the NP must be specified by an adjective (8), another nominal (9) an attribute (10) and by being the first member of a construct state NP (11).

- (8) walad-un    tawil-un      fii lhdikat-i  
boy-Nom    tall-Nom    in the-park  
“A tall boy is in the park.”
- (9) rajaul-un    tabib-un      ghaḏib-un  
man-Nom    doctor-Nom    angry-Nom  
“A man ,who is a doctor, is angry.”
- (10) rajaul-un    min            l-yamen-i            fii   l-9iraq-i  
man-Nom    from            the-yamen-Gen            in    the-iraq-Gen  
“A man from Iraq is in Yamen.”
- (11) ibn-u            tabib-in      fii   l-mostašfa  
son-Nom    doctor-Gen    in    the-hospital-Gen  
“A son of a doctor is in the hospital.”

## 2.1. Predication in verbless sentences

Predication in verbless sentences is achieved without an inflected verb; a correct reading of the sentence depends on identifying the constituent that functions as predicate. However, the nonverbal predicate is classified into three categories: (i) noun as in (12a), (ii) adjective as in (12b) and (iii) preposition as in (13c) (Sibawayh 1977).

- (12) a. ahmad-u            Talib-un  
Ahmad-Nom    student-Nom  
"Ahmad is student"

- b. al-bayt-u            kabiir-un  
the- house-Nom    big-Nom  
“The house is big.”
- c. al-walad-u        fi    l-madiinat-i  
the-boy-Nom    in    the-city-Gen  
“The boy is in the city”

Note that the predicate in (12: a & b) is indefinite. This should be the case when it is a noun or an adjective. In some structures, the predicate can be definite. If so, the 3rd person pronoun *huwwa* must occur between the two constituents. (13) & (14) are good examples:

- (13) a. mohammed-un    huwwa    l-mudarris-u  
Mohammed-Nom    he            the-teacher-Nom  
“Mohammed (is) the teacher.”
- b. \* mohammed-un    l-mudarris-u  
Mohammed-Nom    the-teacher-Nom
- (14) a. khalid-un            huwwa    atthaki-u  
khalid-Nom            he            the-clever-Nom  
“Khalid (is) the clever guy.”
- b. \* khalid-un            atthaki-u  
khalid-Nom            the-clever-Nom

Eid (1983: 43) suggests a functional explanation for the function of this pronoun by proposing that it functions as anti-ambiguity devices to force a sentential, vs. a phrasal, interpretation of a structure. Accordingly, the sentences in (12) and (13) would be interpreted as phrases rather than sentences if the pronoun were not there. Hence, it would be appropriate to call this pronoun a *predicate pronoun* since it reflects an identity relation between the subject and the predicate (Eid 1993: 45). In this perspective, the reason why the predicate pronoun cannot be used when the predicate is indefinite, as shown in (14), is that it is not needed to disambiguate the sentence.

- (15) \*Ali-un        huwwa    Dari:f-un  
Ali-Nom    he        nice-Nom  
“Ali is nice.”

## 2.2. Case and Agreement in Verbless Sentences

It is clear from the preceding examples that case in the subject and predicate of verbless sentences is morphologically realized. The subject is often assigned nominative case as in (1), repeated here as (16):

- (16) ahmad-u                      mu'aallim-un  
 Ahmad-Nom                  teacher -Nom  
 "Ahmad is a teacher."

However, instead of nominative case, the subject is assigned accusative case when it is preceded by external governors such as the complementizer *inna* as in (17). Accusative case must be assigned to both subject and predicate when the verbless sentences are functioning as embedded clauses as in (18).

- (17) inna ahmad-a mu'aallim-un  
 that Ahmad-Acc teacher -Nom  
 "Indeed, Ahmad is a teacher."

- (18) hasib-tu      r-rajul-a              mariid-an  
 thought-I      the-man-Acc      sick-Acc  
 "I thought the man sick."

The predicate, on the other hand, is often assigned nominative Case as in (16) above, except when its sentence is an embedded as in (18) above. However, when the predicate is a prepositional phrase as in (19) and (20), it is always assigned genitive case. The governor, of course, is the preposition.

- (19) huwa-3MS      fi      d-daar-i  
 he-Nom              in      the-house-Gen  
 "He is in the house."

- (20) hasib-tu              r-rajul-a              fi d-daar-i  
 thought-I              the-man-Acc              in the-house-Gen  
 "I thought the man in the house."

Regarding Agreement, consider the following sentences:

- (21) mohammd-un              mu'aallim-un      w      l-bint-ani              TalIbat-ani  
 [Mohammd-Nom ]      [teacher-Nom]      and      [the-two girls-Nom]      [students-Nom]  
 [3-MS]                      [3-MS]                      [3- D<sup>3</sup>F]                      [3- DF]  
 [Nom-Case]                      [Nom-Case]                      [Nom-Case]                      [Nom-Case]  
 "Mohammd is a teacher and the two girls are students."

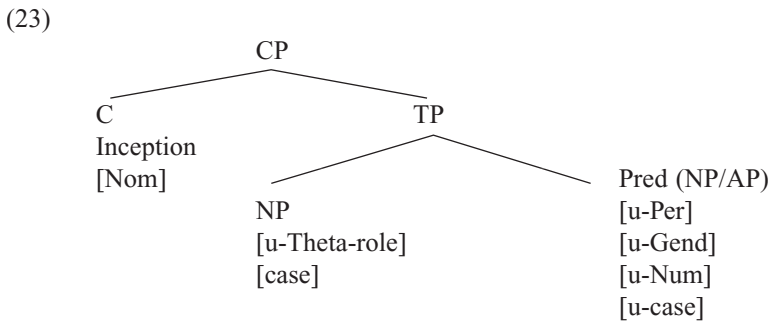
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<sup>3</sup> "D" here is an abbreviation of Dual. The Dual is formed by adding the termination ٰا 'aani' in the nominative Case and ٰا 'aini' in the other cases (Haywood and Nahmad, 1995).

- (22) ?r-rijal-u                      sa'aiduuna                      w    an-nsa?-u                      mota'ajebat-un  
the-men-Nom                      happy-Nom                      and the-women-Nom                      surprised- Nom  
[3-PM]                              [3-PM]                              [3-PF]                              [3-PF]  
[Nom-Case]                      [Nom-Case]                      [Nom-Case]                      [Nom-Case]  
"The men are happy and the women are surprised.

The overall conclusion to be drawn from (21) and (22) is that agreement between the subject and the predicate in verbless sentences is full agreement. The predicate carries all features that the subject has: number, person, gender and case. This full agreement is the result of a direct feature-valuing relation between the predicate AP or NP and the subject.

The subject is assigned nominative by an abstract governor *ibtida* (inception), which we assume is a form of C. The subject also needs a theta role. This makes it a probe. This role can only get from the predicate AP/NP. This predicate, on the other hand, has unvalued phi-features, including u-case, which are all valued by the subject. In this way there is a mutual feature-valuing relation between the subject probe and the predicate goal. (23) illustrates how this full agreement works:



The abstract governor in the Arabic theory of government is an element which is non-existent in the apparent structure (Al-Liheibi 1999:136). This element is called by this theory *al9amil alma9nawi* which is not a verb or particle but a concept that is created by grammarians to explain *9alamat al-e9rab* “parsing signs” “whenever the apparent structure of the sentence does not include an expressed element that is capable to govern the other elements” (ibid).

### 3. The deep structure of verbless sentences

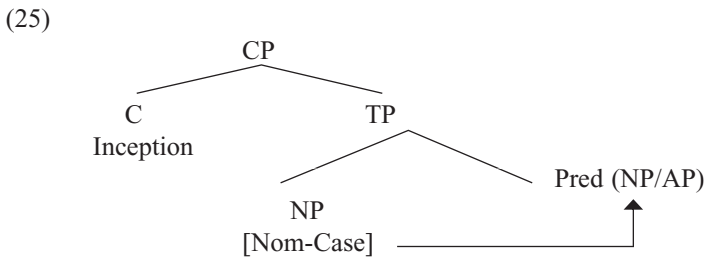
This section considers the following questions regarding D-structure of verbless sentences. (i) Are they a type of small clauses with no VP but with an abstract governor assigning normative case to the subject (Sibawayh 1977) or with a null Aux preceding the predicate (Jelinek 1981). (ii) Is there a null copula in this particular structure as argued by Bakir (1980) and Fassi Fehri (1993)?

### 3.1. Abstract functional category in verbless sentences

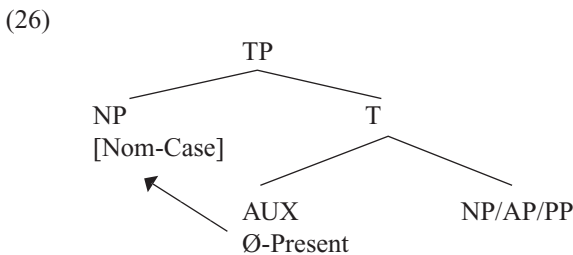
As pointed out earlier, a common view which is adopted by Arabic traditional grammar is that predication in verbless sentences is achieved without an inflected verb (Sibawayh 1977); a correct reading of the sentence depends on identifying the constituent that functions as subject, which is traditionally called *mubtada*, and the other constituent that functions as predicate. Thus all predication is divided into two categories: verbal sentences, in which the verb is initial in the sentence, and nominal sentences in which a nominal element is initial (Miller, 1993). This analysis must lead to the following question: since predication is achieved without an inflected verbal form, how does the subject get its nominative case in (24), for example?

- (24) khalid-un      šuja'a-un  
 khalid-Nom    brave-Nom  
 "Khalid (is) brave."

As previously discussed, the answer is that the subject in (24) is assigned nominative by an abstract governor which is the *ibtida* 'inception', and that the predicate is assigned nominative by agreement with the subject (Sibawayh 1977). This is illustrated in (25):



As can be seen in (25), the null abstract functional category is placed in C position. This suggests that there is a null C which assigns nominative to the subject. An alternative analysis is proposed by Jelinek (1981), on the basis of Egyptian Arabic data. She argues that there is a null AUX which is located between the subject and predicate. This category is specified for the present tense feature only. This analysis is shown in (26).

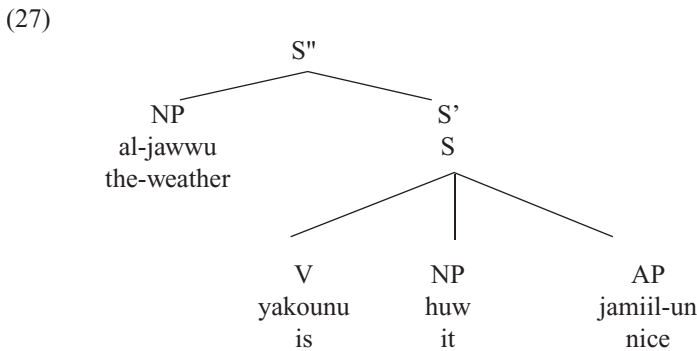




It is hard to adopt the assumption of a null AUX in (26) for the reason that this null AUX cannot c-command the NP because it is in a lower position and hence it cannot be able to assign nominative to the NP. By contrast, the null abstract functional category is in the C position which is higher as illustrated in (26). Therefore, it is capable to c-command the NP. However, suggesting there is a null T, seems plausible since this construction has a feature tense that is specified for agreement only as illustrated in tree (23) above (cf. Doron 1986).

#### 4. Copula and verbless sentences

It is widely argued that there is a verbal copula in Arabic verbless sentences but it is phonologically null or deleted. In this connection, Bakir (1980) proposes that there is a verbal copula in these small clauses. However, the NP that precedes the copula is a topic and the subject is a pronominal element and that its position is directly after the copula. According to “two processes of deletion may take place here: subject-pronoun deletion, since the subject pronoun *huwa* is co-referential with the topic-NP; and we would also need a rule of copula-deletion” (Bakir 1980: 176). His suggestion can be represented as in (27):



The analysis in (27) results from the observation that the *wh*-element appears to the right of the subject and not to the left of it as in (28):

- (28) al-jaww-u                    kayfa yakuunu    fii    šita?  
 the-weather-Nom    how    is    in    the-winter-Gen?  
 “The weather, how is it in winter?”

Fassi Fehri (1993) agrees with Bakir that there is a copula but it does not undergo deletion. It is, according to him, inserted as null. After considering the copula state in different tenses, he arrives at the conclusion that the copula is phonetically realized (as in the case of past tense) in what might be taken as specified moods, tenses, or aspects. Then he postulates the following, spelling out a rule for the copula:

(29) Spell out the copula as *kwn* when Mood, Aspect, and/or Tenses are specified, otherwise spell it out as zero (Fassi Fehri 1993:156).

Benmamoun (2000) considers the null or deleted copula implausible because when a copula is overt in Arabic, it assigns accusative Case to the predicate as in (30):

(30) kana                      khalid-un              mu'aallim-an  
be.past.3MS              khalid-Nom              teacher-Acc  
"Khalid was a teacher."

However, in verbless sentences, the predicate is nominative as in (31):

(31) khalid-un              mu'aallim -un  
khalid-Nom              teacher-Nom  
"Khalid is a teacher."

So, if the assumption of null copula is correct, the null copula should not assign a different case from that of the overt copula. One piece of evidence in support of Benmamoun's objection comes from the principle that is adopted by Arabic theory of government in (32):

(32) Governing words bear Case-assigning, when they are null or deleted (see Al-Liheibi 1999:181& 193).

Consider the sentence from CA in (33):

(33) (?'aTi-ni)      ?l-kitab-a<sup>4</sup>  
(give-me)      the-book-Acc  
"Give me the book."

In (33), the verb *?'aTi-ni* 'give me' is phonologically unexpressed but syntactically represented by still assigning accusative case to the object; otherwise the object must be nominative.

Shlonsky (1997) rejects the assumption of null or deleted copula of present tense "since the language has a binary tense system in which the present tense is expressed, in the unmarked case, by the imperfect form of be "yakuun", which is morphologically regular (i.e., phonetically realized)" (p.102). For supporting Shlonsky's rejection, the following data are collected from MSA to give evidence on the occurrence of the copula in the present tense:

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<sup>4</sup> Note that the ellipted element *?'aTi-ni* is indicated by a situational indicator. In (33) the surrounding circumstances can help the addressee to guess the ellipted element easily. If the word *?l-kitab-a* is spoken and there is a book lying nearby on a table and the speaker is addressing a friend sitting beside that table, then the meaning will require the ellipted element *?'aTi-n. i*

Fassi Fehri (1993:155) indicates that “the copula occurs when a stative, adjective or locative conveys a general or habitual meaning” as in (34):

- (34) ?indamaa yakounu r-rajul-u mariiḏ-an fa-?inna-hu laa y-ubaalii  
 when is the-man-Nom sick-Acc then –that- him not 3MS–care  
 “When the man is sick, he does not care.”

In (34), the verb (yakuun) is syntactically in the form of present tense “imperfect” and semantically refers to a situation which often happens in the present. Also, the present form of the copula optionally appears in polite use as exemplified by (35):

- (35) ?-akounu sa’aeed-an bi-liQaa?-i-ka  
 am I-Nom happy-Acc with-meeting-Gen-you  
 “I would be happy to meet you.” (Fassi Fehri 1993:205)

Other cases which require the presence of the copula in the present tense involve modality with *qad* “may”, *yajib ?an* “must” and *yastatii’au ?an* “can” (Bahloul 1994). These are represented in (36-38), respectively:

- (36) a. al-Qalam-u tahta aTTawelaht-i  
 the-pen-Nom under the-table-Gen  
 “The pen is under the table.”  
 b. \* Qad al-qalam-u tahta aTTawelaht-i  
 may the-pen-Nom under the-table-Gen  
 c. Qad yakounu al-Galam-u tahta aTTawilaht-i  
 may is the-pen-Nom under the-table-Gen  
 “The pen may be under the table.”
- (37) a. \* *yajibu ?an* al-Qalam-u tahta aTTawilaht-i  
 must the-pen-Nom under the-table-Gen  
 b. *yajib ?an* yakuunu al-Galam-u tahta aTTawilaht-i  
 must that be the-pen-Nom under the-table-GEN  
 “The pen must be under the table.”
- (38) a. huwa mudiir-un  
 he director-Nom  
 “He is a director.”  
 b.\* yastaTii’au ?an mudiir-un  
 can that director-Nom  
 c. yastaTii’au ?an yakounu mudiir-an  
 can that is director-Acc  
 “He can be a director.”

Another environment where the copula occurs involves the context of a specific interpretation of the present tense as in (39).

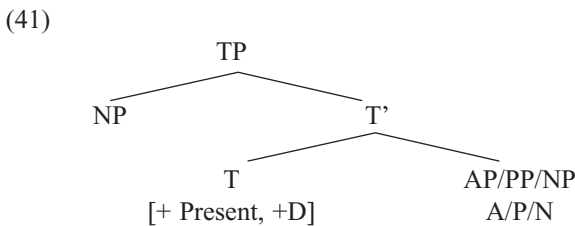
- (39) yakounu al-jaww-u                    ħaarr-an                    fi ssayf-i  
 Pres -be the-weather-Nom            hot-Acc                    in the-summer-Acc  
 “The weather is hot in the summer.” (Benmamoun 2000: 47).

By contrast, the imperfective form of the copula is not allowed in verbless sentences as shown by (40) below.

- (40) \* ?mar-u (yakuunu)                    tawil-an  
 Omar-Nom (Pres-be.3MS)                tall-Acc                    (Benmamoun 2000: 47).

**5. Discussion**

According to the preceding data, we are facing a problematic issue due to this fact: two structures of predicative sentences in the present tense are found in Arabic. One is with an absent copula and another with an overt copula as exemplified in the earlier preceding examples. This analysis leads to these questions: (i) what has forced Arabic to have the two structures? (ii) Is there a semantic difference between them? In this regard, Bahloul (1994) argues that the occurrence and non-occurrence of the copula is related to the type of features on the Tense. T can take any phrasal category as a complement, as illustrated in (41).



Accordingly, he assumes that when the TP is tensed, T selects a VP complement headed by a verbal element that obligatorily moves to support the tense features in T as were illustrated in (45-47); but if T is empty or featureless other categories than VP would occur (NP, AP, or PP). However, Bahloul’s argument does not seem to be plausible since the TP in (50) is tensed but cannot select a VP. Consider the following example from Benmamoun (2000: 48).

- (42) a. al-jaww-u                    harr-un                    ?l-yum-a  
          the-weather-Nom                    hot-Nom                    today-Acc  
          “The weather is hot today.”  
       b. \* yakuunu                    al-jaww-u                    ħar-an                    l-yum-a  
          Pres-be                    the-weather-Nom hot-Acc                    today-Acc

In (42), although the T head in the present tense is specified for a tense feature, it is mysterious why the copula insertion rule does not apply to it. In this connection, Benmamoun tries to explain why the verb is not required in verbless sentences. He adopts the following assumption:

- (43) Movement to tense is not driven by the requirement to provide a host for tense. Since tense does not need a host the distribution of the copula must be found elsewhere (Benmamoun 2000: 49).

Alternatively, he suggests that this problem can be solved if we dispense with the idea that sentences always have a verb [+V]. He proposes that the nonverbal sentences in present tense contain EPP feature [+D] only. "Since it is not [+V], there is no need for a verbal copula. However, its [+D] feature must be checked, a role that can be adequately fulfilled by the subject" (ibid). According to his analysis, the sentence in (42: b) is ungrammatical because 'the deictic present tense' is not [+V] hence a verbal copula is not allowed. However, In addition to this syntactic reason, there is a semantic reason that plays a significant role in the obligatory absence or presence of the copula. An important point of detail to note is that Arabic linguistic thinking from the time of early Arab grammarians has divided the sentences into two categories: sentences containing a verb and others that do not. This division is due to the different semantic function that is conveyed by the two sentences. The nominal sentence bears the meaning of permanence while the verbal sentence bears the meaning of transient (Al-Liheibi 1999:78). Consider the meaning of the following sentences:

- (44) khalid-un                      jawad-un  
       khalid-Nom                    generous-Nom  
       "Khalid is generous."

- (45) yajud-u                        khalid-un  
       Pres-give generously khalid-Nom  
       "Khalid gives generously."

The sentence in (44) is nominal 'nonverbal', and conveys the meaning of permanence. That is to say, generosity is associated with *Khalid* as a part of his character. However, the next sentence (45) is a verbal sentence which has the sense of occurrence in which *Khalid* is sometimes generous but this is not an essential part of his character (see: Al-Liheibi 1999: 78). Thus, they dispensed with the idea that sentences always have a verb because this idea would miss a semantic generalization.

The obvious question that arises now is that since Arabic has the present form derived from the root *k.a.n* of the copula verb by adding the prefix *ya-* to the imperfect verb form resulting in *yakouun*, what is the semantic difference between present tense sentences that can contain the copula and those that cannot? Before turning to consider the answer of this question, let us note that Arabic traditional grammar considers present tense sentences that

can contain the copula *yakoun* verbal sentences. This is simply because they start with a verb (Sibawayh 1977).

Indeed, there is a semantic difference between the two constructions. As mentioned before, predicative sentences with absent copula indicates the meaning of permanence as illustrated by (44). However, it also, particularly in MSA, describes situations that are true in the present moment only but in this case, “deictic temporal adverbs” such as *?l?aan* “now” or *?lyum* “today” must occur as in (42) above (see Benmanoun 2000: 47). By contrast, predicative sentences with an overt copula *yakuun* do not follow the Arabic verbal sentences semantically in terms of bearing the meaning of transience as exemplified in the preceding example of (45). This is because the copula in Arabic (and possibly in other languages) does not have the ability to convey the meaning of transience (Bergsträsser 1997). However, the copula “*yakuun*” performs other semantic functions such as “describing situations that are usually true in the past, are true in the present, and are expected to be true in the future” (Benmanoun 2000: 47). The sentence in (39), repeated here as (46) is a good example.

- |                                     |          |                   |
|-------------------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| (46) yakounu al-jaww-u              | haarr-an | fii ssayf-i       |
| Pres -be the-weather-Nom            | hot-Acc  | in the-summer-Acc |
| “The weather is hot in the summer.” |          |                   |

Also when the copula is expressed, the sentences will more likely be emphatic than when it is absent (Dukhayil 2004).

The overall conclusion to be drawn from our discussion is that the assumption of a deleted V or a null VP (copula) in Arabic verbless sentences seems implausible for the following reasons. First, since Arabic has an overt form of the copula that can occur in the present tense, it is hard to adopt the claim of a null or deleted copula. Second, null constituents, according to Minimalist Theory, can be defined as “constituents which have grammatical and semantic features but lack phonetic features” (Radford 2004:106). However, in Arabic nonverbal sentences, there is no feature remaining for the copula. The Case of the predicate is different between sentences with the past tense and sentences with the present tense, as we illustrated. If verbless sentences are also underlyingly verbless, then we can explain the difference by postulating that accusative on the predicate is assigned by V, while nominative on the predicate is assigned by agreement with the nominative subject. Assuming that verbless sentences do not have a null copula also explains why they are semantically different from predicative sentences with a copula.

## 6. Conclusion

The primary aim of this paper has been to provide a comprehensive analysis for the claim that Arabic verbless sentences contain a null or deleted copula. For a number of reasons illustrated in the course of the paper there, this assumption seems implausible, in particular, after we have learnt that Arabic has the present form derived from the root *k.a.n* of the copula verb by adding the prefix *ya-* to the imperfect verb form resulting in *yakuun*.

Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that there is no V and hence no VP in Arabic verbless sentences. Instead, this study has argued for the approach that Arabic has two alternatives (both are syntactically and semantically different) to express the present tense with such sentences: one is achieved without an inflected verb and the other with a verb (copula) inflected for tense.

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