

Pragmatically Motivated Non-Canonical Syntax in

English and Arabic Preposing as a Case Study

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1- Introduction

This study is a type of the pragmatics-syntax alliance where pragmatics has some effect over syntax. Typically, syntax is the domain where "the formal relations" of one linguistic sign ,like words or phrases, to another are investigated (Mey, 2009:786). On the other hand, pragmatics is "the relation of signs to those who interpret the signs, the users of language" (Morris, 1938:6 (cited in ibid.).

Guaranteeing such sign-interpreting by language users is a way of achieving the communicative function of language. Those users (speakers and listeners) must support each other to ensure mutual understanding. One such type of support is word order that is an area of syntax. To illustrate, when language users communicate, they distribute information in their utterances . Van Valin (1999:155) assumes that this distribution ranges between information "which is presented by the speaker as assumed to be known, accessible..." to listeners, and another piece of information "which is presented by the speaker as unknown, inaccessible and not recoverable , hence as new and informative". Such distribution from known to unknown information is usually signaled by or correlated with word order. Accordingly, Horn (1986) (cited in Green, 2006:416) explains this correlation, between information distribution and word order. He observes that "the initial slot in a sentence tends to be reserved for material.....that the speaker assumes to be familiar to the addressee". Thus, information distribution ,which is an aspect of pragmatics, is reflected in re-ordering the constituents of the sentence. One such reordering of the sentence is that of preposing which affects its syntax.

In this respect, Green (ibid.:407) describes preposing as a construction "whose use conveys pragmatic information about the beliefs of the speaker-beliefs about the world (presuppositions), about the propositional attitudes of the addressee, or about the structure of the ongoing discourse".

As for Arabic, grammarians discuss some syntactic phenomena in pragmatic terms. For example, preposing is discussed with respect to the speaker and listener attitude towards what is being said. That is, the constituent they consider as representing the new or the most important information is usually placed earlier in the sentence. Regarding preposing, Ibrahim (1980) (cited in Swerty, 2007:91) claims that some of the reasons behind it have to do with mind, logic, reality, knowledge of the world and creatures and the philosophy of existence. This can be a clear reference to the general effect of language users upon syntax.

2- Aims and Procedures

This study aims at showing how syntax could be motivated by pragmatics in English and Arabic, that is, specially when it comes to changes in the typical word order of

constituents due to their pragmatic value. The procedures include:

- in both languages, a theoretical background of the cooperation between pragmatics and syntax is presented.

- regarding English, canonical syntax and non-canonical one is compared.

- preposing is given as an example of non-canonical syntax.

- preposing is discussed first syntactically and then it is viewed pragmatically from language users' viewpoint.

- regarding Arabic, preposing is syntactically explained.

- then preposing is pragmatically approached depending on two principles of a certain recent attempt in Arabic (Sahrawi, 2005).

3- Canonical vs Non-Canonical Syntax

English word order is said to be canonical if the sentence constituents are placed according to their "usual, typical or normal" position which they usually occupy (Radford, 2004:326). Compare the two variants:

- a- The mouse saw the giraffe.
- b- **The giraffe**, the mouse saw.

(Goldberg, 2006:429)

the first variant is an example of canonical syntax where every constituent is arranged according to the SVO pattern that is typical of English. On the other hand, the second variant represents non-canonical syntax where the constituent (**The giraffe**) is preposed initially away from the typical final position it usually fills as object.

Word and Birner (2006:158-163) claim that preposing, left-dislocation and postposing are examples of non-canonical syntactic constructions. This study is concerned with preposing.

4- Preposing in English Syntax

Preposing is a positional transfer of a certain constituent to the beginning of the clause. Trask (1993:84) describes it as "the occurrence of an element in a sentence in other than its canonical position". Moreover, Radford (2004: 353) assumes that preposing is "the movement operation by which a constituent is moved further to the left within a phrase or a sentence". Still, the treatment here is restricted to the preposing of constituents within sentences not phrases.

- **This book** I can not understand.

the constituent (**This book**) is further moved from its canonical position as an object following its verb. Trask (ibid.:176, 280) considers such a construction as "marked" where markedness refers to the "less central or less natural" construction. That is, the order resulting from such preposing is somehow less familiar than the usual canonical order where the object follows its verb.

Quirk et al. (1985:1377-78) call the construction in question "fronting" attributing this movement of element to the pragmatics of information processing. It is assumed that such preposing is achieved to mark either "what has been contextually given" or what is "contextually most demanded". To illustrate, the element that might be brought forward is usually the old or given information or what is pragmatically known as topic. Still, the preposed element may also represent the new or most important information or what is called "focus".

It is claimed that various elements of the sentence might be preposed like object, prepositional complement, complement whether subjective or

complement, adverbials and prediction.
(Quirk et al., ibid.:1378)

- **His face** not many were enamoured of, while **his character** still fewer could praise.

- **Traitor** he has become and **traitor** we shall call him.

Quirk et al. (ibid.)

- **In the park** stood a bronze statue.

Trask (ibid.:280)

- I thought they 'd be complaining, and **complaining** they were.

It should be noted that preposing is something different from left-dislocation. Left-dislocation is defined as "a construction in which an element is displaced from its normal position in the sentence, that position is being occupied by a pro-form" (Trask, ibid.:84). That is, although the two constructions share the initial movement of an element from its usual position, still in left-dislocation that position will be filled by a pro-form substituting the initially moved element.

- **This wine**, I really like it.

5- Pragmatically Motivated Preposing in English

Bentley (2008:264) assumes that English is a prime example of "pragmatic flexibility" where there is "the grammatical encoding of the domain of the assertion or focus, in contrast with the topical or presupposed part of the utterance". To illustrate, English word order could be pragmatically flexible and this flexibility is reflected in placing focus information in position contrasting to that of topic information.

- Eks delivered a rug to Aitchberg.

- **A rug**, Eks delivered to Aitchberg.

Green (2006: 417)

Green (ibid.:409) describes such constructions as "truth-conditionally equivalent constructions". And he claims that preferring one of these alternatives to another has to do with the "pragmatic value" these alternatives may convey. Crystal (1985:317) explains that the meaning of the sentence is said to be truth-conditioned if it is viewed according to "conditions in the real world under which the sentence may be used to make a true statement".

To illustrate, the two alternatives have meaning that is true, i.e., the meaning of someone giving something to someone else. Still, pragmatically

speaking, these variants are different, that is why Green (ibid.) claims that these "alternatives turn out to have different pragmatic values". That is, the alternative with the preposed constituent is intended to introduce that constituent as the topic of the sentence. Following Green (ibid.:416-7), this topicalization (the process of preposing the topic) is attributed to the claim that "the first phrase in a sentence tends to be intended to denote familiar (or topical or given or old or presupposed or predictable) material".

Van Valin (1999:155) relates this claim to the pragmatic distinction of information status as topic "known" or focus "new". Additionally, Gundel and Frethiem (2006:182) assumes that these pragmatic values of topic and focus are "syntactically coded" by preposing the constituent representing the topic earlier in "a syntactically prominent position".

In conclusion, Ward and Birner (2006:156) describes such constructions, like the ones above, which reflect different pragmatic values as "functionally distinct syntactic constructions". That is, each one has a communicative function distinct from that of the other.

Even More, when the variant with topicalization is used in the context below, the pragmatically generated word order is clearly shown. It is obvious that the preposed constituent (**One of these rugs**) is in relation to (six full-size oriental rugs) which is previously stated. This shows (**One of these rugs**) as the topic or the given information in the sentence.

-An Eastern bloc embassy official gave Eks six full-size oriental rugs, and directed him to give them to the senators who had been most cooperative.

One of these rugs Eks delivered to Sen. Aitchberg.

Green (2006:418)

In support to this, Van Valin (ibid.:155,435) explains that "topic is contained in the pragmatic presupposition or is an element of the pragmatic supposition". Pragmatic presupposition means the proposition (the semantic content) or assumption which can be inferred from what is being communicated. Accordingly, the pragmatic assumption in the above context is the giving of the six full-size oriental rugs and (**One of these rugs**) is an element of that assumption ,i.e., it is the topic.

It is worth mentioning that Van Valin (ibid.) describes such constructions as ones which "involve displacement of elements from their default position to the left toward the onset of the utterance". Thus, they are practicing a "topicalizing function".

It might be convenient to conclude this part of the section with Goldberg's(2006:429) remark about topicalization as one of the constructions that reflect correlation between information structure and argument structure. An argument is the noun phrase that is related to a predicate like verbs either by a grammatical relation such as an object or by a semantic relation such as a patient (See Trask, 1993:20). That is, when a certain element is preposed as topic or topicalized, this will affect the argument structure of that construction.

In the previous example, before preposing, (**One of these rugs**) is the argument of (delivered) and it is related to this verb as its object. After recognizing the information status of that argument as a topic, it is topicalized affecting the argument structure of that sentence.

Away from the previous claim, it should be noted that not every

preposing is topic preposing. Focus of information can also be put forward resulting in what Ward and Birner (2006:160) call "focus preposing".

- Colonel Kadafy, you said you were planning on sending planes – **M-16s**
I believe they were – to Sudan.

Ward and Birner (ibid.)

it is assumed that the preposed object (**M-16s**) is the information focus. This is because the word (planes) allows the listeners to consider (**M-16s**) as one type of these planes. As a result, the word (planes) is "discourse-old" information providing previous context, while the preposed (**M-16s**) is the information "that has not been evoked in the prior discourse". (Ward and Birner, ibid.:161)

That is, although one can infer that (**M-16s**) is one of the previously mentioned planes, but that type has not been explained clearly in the previous part of the utterance, that is, it is discourse new. In other words, it is the focus.

Similarly, Gundel and Frethiem (2006:182-3) gives another example of focus preposing. He assumes that the part preposed is "part of the information focus, the new information

identifying objects that would be included in the set described by the topic".

- A: Which of these clothes do you think we should give to the Salvation Army?

B: **That coat** you're wearing (I think we can give away).
the preposed element (**That coat**) represents just one part of the clothes one can donate but that part has not been mentioned previously. Thus, the donated things mentioned earlier in A's question represent the topic while the preposed thing in B's answer is the focus.

6- Pragmatically Motivated Syntax in Arabic⁽¹⁾

Recently, Arabic syntax has been discussed in pragmatic terms. That is, syntactic constructions are no longer viewed in pure structural terms. Rather, they might be described in the way language users use them. One such attempt is that of Makbool (2006:287-9). Makbool (ibid.) argues for the existence of "pragmatic flexion" (الأعراب التداولي) which is somehow different from flexion in general. Generally, flexion or declination means showing variations (الحركات) on the last part of words in Arabic to

⁽¹⁾ All terms of Arabic grammar used in this study, like the above ones, are taken from El-Dahdah's (1993) *A Dictionary of Arabic Grammatical Nomenclature*.

indicate their functions in the sentence. But sometimes, the conditions of flexion are violated due to pragmatic considerations. For example, according to Arabic syntactic rules, the adjective is supposed to correspond the noun it modifies in showing the same variation. Still, this is not always the case, as in :

- مررتُ بعبد الله الكريم الفاضل.

- I passed by the generous virtuous Abdullah.

On the one hand, the first adjective (عبد الله) is modifying the noun (الكريم) and showing the same variation of reduction (الكسرة) as that noun. On the other hand, the second adjective is also modifying that noun but disagrees with it in variation.

Makbool (2006:291-292) claims that this difference in variation is due to the pragmatic conditions of glorifying (التعظيم). That is, speakers of Arabic are accustomed to the fact that if one chose to glorify a certain person, the quality glorified should be one of praising. Also, it is conditioned that the person, to whom the praise is directed, should

be known to the listeners. Thus, in the above example the speaker chooses gratitude (الفاضل) for praising. Besides he introduces the adjective (الكريم) to make (عبد الله) known to the listeners. After satisfying the pragmatic conditions for glorifying, the adjective (الفاضل) will be opened (منصوبة) for glorifying. This is just an example of pragmatic flexion where the syntax of the sentence changes due to pragmatic reasons.

As far as preposing is concerned, some Arab grammarians attribute that change in order in certain sentences to the psychology of the speaker and listener (language users), two important pillars of pragmatics.

7- Preposing in Arabic

In Arabic, the study of preposing has to do with word order (الرتبة). Hesan (2000:67-70) defines word order as: a word is said to have a recognized position in relation to another word accompanying it in a certain construction, when that word precedes or follows its accompanying word. It is also claimed that if the word maintains its position (for example in front of its accompanying word), then the word is said to have a fixed word order (رتبة محفوظة). But if its position is open to

change (either follows or precedes the accompanying word) then the word is said to have a non-fixed word order (رتبة غير محفوظة). (See: Hussein, 2010:93)

- توكلنا على الله.

- In God we trusted.

In the above example, Hesan (٢٠٠٠ :68) explains that a preposition like (على) can never follow its complement (الله). Its position preceding its accompanying word (الله) is always maintained. Thus, in Arabic a preposition is said to have a fixed word order.

Regarding non-fixed word order, some words might precede or follow the word they accompany or co-occur with. It is well known that Arabic has the pattern VSO, where the verb has a precedence over the subject. Still, the subject might be preposed especially after hamza of interrogation (همزة الاستفهام). (Al-A'mery, 1996:128-9)

- أقلت الشعر الذي في نفسك؟

- أأنت قلت هذا الشعر؟

- Have you said the poetry you had?

- Is it you who said that poetry?

the first sentence represents the normal order, while the second displays the preposing of the subject (أنت) in front of the verb.

Moreover, Al-Samara'ay (2009:49) declares that the object usually follows its verb in Arabic and sometimes it may precede that verb:

- أنجذت خالدًا.
- خالدًا أنجذت.

- I helped Khalid.
- Khalid, I helped.

it is clear that the object (خالدًا) in the first sentence occupies its normal position following its accompanying verb (أنجذت). Still, in the second that word is brought forward from post-verb position to pre-verb position.

Abu-Ma'za (2008:73) says that if the speaker needs to assert part of the sentence without using means of assertion in Arabic, he might prepose that part.

Hessan (ibid.:67) claims that fixed word order is originated in the Arabic language system and its use, while the non-fixed one is found in the language system only, but language use might impose its presence. Actually, this is a clear reference to the pragmatic aspect of preposing as an example of non-fixed order.

In addition, Hussein (2010:92) thinks that preposing of the type above is only locative. That is, when a certain word is preposed, it is only its place that is changed with no change in its

flexion. The object is still object even when it is moved away from its canonical place.

Other types of non-fixed word order can also be found in reference (الإسناد) like that between the primate (المبتدأ) and the predicate (الخبر). Al-A'mery (1996: 59,94) claims that the primate is usually placed before the predicate since the latter supplies information about the former. Still, this order between the primate and the predicate is not always maintained since the predicate can be preposed.

- زيد قائم.
- قائم زيد.

- Zaid is standing.
- Standing Zaid is.

the first order is the usual one while the second one displays preposing where the predicate (قائم) is placed in front of its primate (زيد).

In addition to these cases, another kind of non-fixed word order is found in the preposing of circumstantial (الظرف). El-Dahdah (1993:423) presumes that Arabic sentence consists of a pillar (عمدة) and a supplement (فضلة). The pillar is the basis of the sentence and represented by the verb (المسند) and the subject (المسند إليه). On the other hand, what is added to clarify the meaning of these basic words is called supplement. Circumstantial is considered as

supplement in Arabic since it refers to the place or time of the verb. Hassenain (2005:197) claims that sometimes the circumstantial is preposed in front of the pillars (عاد) and (زيد) as in :

- البارحة عاد زيد من السفر .

- Yesterday, Zaid returned from travel.

8- Pragmatically Motivated Preposing in Arabic

Al-Jirjani (no date) (cited in Al-A'mery, ibid.:128-9) assumes that the speaker intends to prepose a constituent to achieve certain psychological ends; thus he orders the words in a way different from the usual order they follow. This will affect the psychology of the listener. The human psyche looks forward to hear what is concerning or important . That is why, the speaker preposes what concerns him once he starts speaking. For example, if one preposes the subject (عبد الله), he will attract the listeners' attention and prepare them to accept whatever said about that subject for example (قام) or (خرج) or (قدم). Wunderlich (no date) (cited in ibid.) assumes that there is usual or cliché order that comes first to the mind of the speaker, but once he gets excited about something he forgets about that order and mentions what is important first. It is claimed that in this case the speaker

does not have enough time to match his idea with that strict order.

Actually, this is just an approximation to English focus preposing where the most important information is introduced earlier at the beginning of the sentence.

A somehow recent attempt to approach syntax pragmatically is that of

Sahrawi (2005:185-6). He claims that Arab grammarians pay attention to some principles that are now considered as pragmatic. Two of these principles are the speaker's intention behind his speech and the listener's benefit from that speech. These will be discussed below.

8-1 The Principle of Speaker' Intention⁽²⁾

Starting with the first principle, Sahrawi (ibid.:2005-186) defines it as the communicative end the speaker wants to achieve from his speech. More specifically, Abud Al-Rahman (cited in Makbool, 2011:24-5) necessities that there is no speech unless there is intention. That is, speech is nonsense unless it has a purpose or aim.

Sahrawi (ibid.:202-203) claims that the speaker' intention has its application in many syntactic phenomena like preposing. For example, it is well

known that Arabic is a VSO language. Still, the object might be preposed when it is the focus of the utterance.

- قَتَلَ الْخَارِجِيُّ زَيْدًا.

- Al-Khareji, Zaid Killed.

Al-A'mery (1996:129) assumes that the object (الْخَارِجِيُّ) is preposed in front of the subject since to hear about that object is what people are concerned about. They are not interested to hear about the subject because they might be suffering from (الْخَارِجِيُّ). Pragmatically speaking, the speaker knows that the object is the most important information (focus) to the listeners. That is why, he introduces that word earlier in the sentence.

Similarly, Al-Najar (2011:566) declares that object preposing in the verse below serves to show the eagerness of Pharaoh's woman to the Giver (Allah) of the gift not the gift itself. That is why, the circumstantial (عِنْدَكَ) is preposed before the object (بَيْتًا).

-(وَضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا امْرَأَةٌ فِرْعَوْنَ إِذْ
قَالَتْ رَبِّ ابْنِ لِي عِنْدَكَ بَيْتًا فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَنَجِّنِي مِنْ
فِرْعَوْنَ وَعَمَلِهِ وَنَجِّنِي مِنَ الْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ)

-(And Allah sets forth, as an example to those who believe the wife of Pharaoh: Behold she said: "O my Lord! Build for me, in nearness to Thee, a mansion in the Garden, and save me

from Pharaoh and his doings, and save me from those that do wrong")

Al-Qur'an, 066.011 (At-Tahrim
[Banning, Prohibition])

(2) Text Copied from Divine Islam's
Qur'an Viewer software v2.913

Actually, the word (عِنْدَكَ) is the focus information and this makes such preposing as focus preposing.

8-2 The Principle of Listener's Benefit

The other pragmatic principle is that of the listener's benefit. Sahrawi (2005:195) declares that one of the rules of language use stated by Al-Jirjani (no date) is that of interrogation Hamza. This rule indicates that what comes after the Hamza is the questioned part. Thus, if the speaker chooses to say (أَفَعَلْتَ؟), the listeners will understand that it is the verb that is questioned. That is, the speaker wants to know whether the verb happens or not. On the other hand, if the subject is preposed immediately after the Hamza, it is the preposed subject that is questioned or doubted. Thus, Al-Jirjani (no date) (cited in Sahrawi, ibid.:202-203) concludes saying that in interrogation to start with the noun after the interrogation Hamza is something different from starting with the verb. Other similar examples are:

- أَابْنَيْتَ الدَّارَ الَّتِي كُنْتُ عَلَى أَنْ تَبْنِيهَا؟

- أ أنت بنيت هذه الدار ؟

- Have you built the house you wanted to build?

- Is it you who built this house?

in the first example, the verb is placed before the subject since the interrogation is about that verb. In the second, it is the subject that is interrogated; thus, Al-Jirjani assumes that the home is already built but it is the subject that is suspected.

Again, the second sentence is just another example of focus preposing. That is, building the house is the topic and it is the subject that is the focus. That is, the word (أنت) is made the centre of interrogation. In other words, the preposing is pragmatically motivated to communicate the message required.

Another example of preposing is where the circumstantial is placed directly after the hamza of interrogation preceding the verb and the subject. This is not the usual position for (غدا) as a supplement.

- أ غداً ألقاك (أم بعد غد؟)

- Is it tomorrow the time I meet you?

the word is preposed simply because it is the time of the meeting that concerns the listener not the meeting itself. This is why the preposing here is one of focus.

Another syntactic area of preposing is that of negation. Again, Sahrawi (ibid.:198) claims that Al-Jirjani mentions that the listener might make use of preposing with the negative (ما). It is assumed that this pragmatic rule specifies that after (ما) if the verb is preposed in front of the subject (ما فعلت), the listener will realize that the verb is exclusively negated. Still, if the subject is preposed in front of the verb (ما أنا فعلت), the listener will realize that the verb is already done and it is the subject that is negated.

Again, the preposing with negation is focus preposing. That is, with negation when the object is preposed before the verb is different from when it is kept in its canonical position after the verb:

- ما ضربت زيداً.

- ما زيداً ضربت.

- I did not beat Zaid.

- It is not Zaid that I beat.

in the second sentence, the object (زيداً) is placed earlier before the verb since the message delivered to the listener is that there has been beating and it is not (زيداً) that is beaten but it is someone else (see Sahrawi, 2005:199). Thus, the object (زيداً) is the focus here that is why it is preposed here, while the verb is the topic since it happened already. Similarly, Sahrawi (ibid.) claims that after the negative (ما) when the

prepositional phrase (the preposition and its complement) is preposed in front of the verb, the listener will realize that it is the preposed element that is negated.

- ما أمرتُك بهذا.
- ما بهذا أمرتُك.

- I did not order you to do this.
- It is not this I ordered you to do.

from the first variant, it is understood that there was no ordering regarding this thing or any other thing. The second variant, on the other hand, indicates to the listener that there was ordering but that order was not related to the thing referred to. That is, the speaker ordered something else. Here it is the preposed prepositional phrase (بهذا) that is the focus of negation; thus it is focus preposing.

9- Conclusions

1- In both languages, the syntactic word order can be affected by the beliefs of language users.

2- Again in both languages, various types of constituents may be transported from their canonical position into a non-canonical one.

3- This non-canonical movement can be achieved by preposing. For

example, when the object precedes the subject and the verb in English.

Also in Arabic, the adverb precedes the verb and the subject after hamza of interrogation.

4-That preposing can be attributed to the pragmatic value which the moved constituent represents.

5- In English, the preposed constituent may represent either the topic or the focus. Still in Arabic, it may mostly represent the focus.

6- In both languages, preposing is a mere change in position since the moved constituent keeps the function it has. For example, the preposed object still functions as object despite of change in its position.

7- In English, preposing means to move the constituent into initial position in the sentence.

8- In Arabic, preposing also means to move the constituent into initial position (البارحة عادَ زيدٌ من السفر). But it may also require to move the constituent into a position earlier than its canonical position not necessarily initial (ما زيداَ ضربت).

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