Headness in Arabic – A Case Study in Surah Al-Kahf

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A B S T R A C T

This study aims to identify instances of phrase structures in Surah Al-Kahaf and evaluate them based on Chomsky's head-position parameter theory. The method used in determining the head is mainly syntactic. Semantic criterion is also used here to determine certain cases of head-final structures. English translations (Abdullah Yusaf Alli translation) will be provided of the analyzed phrases for better understanding.

K E Y W O R D S

The Holy Quran, Parameters Theory, Surah Al-Kahf, Patterns of Headness

1.1. Introduction:

The head (constituent) of a phrase is the keyword that determines the properties of the phrase. So, in a phrase such as *fond of fast food*, the head of the phrase is the adjective *fond*, and consequently, the phrase is an adjectival phrase (and hence can occupy typical positions associated with adjectival expressions – e.g. as the complement of *is* in 'He is *fond of fast food*'). In many cases, the term *head* is more or less equivalent to the term *word* (e.g. in sentences such as 'An accusative pronoun can be used as the complement of a transitive head'). In a different use of the same word, the head of a movement chain is the highest constituent in the chain.

Headedness was already explored by scholars like Bloomfield, Marchand, Lyons, and Williams. Bauer (1990) summarizes their criteria:

1. Hyponymy: The phrase represents a sub-category of the head's meaning.
2. Subcategorization: The head chooses its companions in the phrase.
3. Governance: The head controls the grammatical behavior of other elements.
4. Distribution: The head can stand in for the entire phrase in certain contexts.
5. Obligatory element: The head is essential for a complete phrase.
6. Morphosyntactic locus: The head carries the main inflection and agreement features.
7. Lexicality: The head is typically a single word, not a phrase.

The head of a phrase can be identified through its syntactic structure and semantic behavior in sentences. These criteria provide linguists with a framework for analyzing such constructions and making informed decisions about the head within them.

1.2. Principles and Parameters Theory:

The Headedness Principle specifies that every constituent must be headed. So, for example, an expression like *fond of fast food* is headed by the adjective *fond* and so is an adjectival phrase. Noam Chomsky's groundbreaking theory of Principles and Parameters (PP henceforth), proposed in the 1980s, revolutionized our understanding of language acquisition and structure. This theory posits that all human languages share a set of universal principles, such as the organization of phrases around heads. However, these principles are subject to parametric variation, meaning the specific order of heads and other phrasal components can differ across languages.

PP builds on the foundation of X-bar theory, developed by Ray Jackendoff, which governs the hierarchical relationships between heads, complements, specifiers, and adjuncts within phrases. In this theory, the complement, which provides additional information necessary for the head, holds a special position as the head's sister. Notably, the order of head and complement can vary, leading to two distinct structures:

1. Head-initial structure: The head precedes the complement.
2. Head-final structure: The complement precedes the head.

The PP theory further proposes a head-directionality parameter as a way to classify languages. Languages with predominantly head-initial structures are categorized as head-initial languages, while those favoring head-final structures are considered head-final languages. However, researches reveal that many languages exhibit inconsistencies, displaying both head-initial and head-final patterns; among them the Arabic language.

Linguists have devised various theories to explain these inconsistencies. Some propose a more consistent underlying order, suggesting that surface deviations are caused by the phenomenon of phrasal movement, where phrases are moved from their original positions to new locations in the sentence.

Chomsky's Principles and Parameters theory plays an important role in theorizing universal language principles and their specific variations across diverse human languages. It sheds light on the intricate relationship between heads and their dependents, illuminating the different ways language's structure phrases and convey meaning.

1.3. Some Patterns of Headness Revealed in Surah Al-Kahaf:

1. Verse 6: "فَلَعَلَّكَ بَاخِعٌ نَفْسَكَ عَلَى اٰثَارِهِمْ اِنْ لَمْ يُؤْمِنُوْا بِهٰذَا الْحَدِيْثِ اَسَفًا" ("Yet it may be that you will consume yourself in their wake if they should not believe in this discourse out of grief.").

The verb فَلَعَلَّكَ (fala'allaka) (maybe) is one of the verbal particles that affects the words that follow it. It assigns the accusative case to the Second-person singular masculine pronoun (كَ) attached to the verb root and nominative case to the predicate "بَاخِعٌ" (baḥīḥun). This head-initial structure shows that the verb لَعَلَّ (la'alla) (as the head of the sentence.

2. Verse 9: "اَمْ حَسِبْتَ اَنَّ اَصْحٰبَ الْكَهْفِ وَ الرَّقِيْمِ كَانُوْا مِنْ اٰيٰتِنَا عَجَبًا") ("Or did you think that <u>the Companions of the Cave</u> and the Inscription were a [unique] marvel from among Our signs?").

In this sentence, the noun "اَصْحٰبَ " (aṣḥābu) ("the companions") comes before the noun (al-kahfi) ("the Cave "). "اَصْحٰبَ الْكَهْفِ", is a compound-noun. Both nouns are connected by the definite article الـ(al-). The noun الْكَهْفِ(al-kahf) provides more specific information about the noun اَصْحٰبَ (aṣḥāba), identifying them as the "companions of the cave."; it is essential to the meaning and cannot be omitted. Therefore, الْكَهْفِ(al-kahf) acts as the head of the phrase. In other words, the noun (اَصْحٰبَ) here is generic and gains its specific meaning through the following modifier الْكَهْفِ(al-kahf). Semantically speaking, the whole expression is a head-final structure.

3. Verse 25: "وَلَبِثُوْا فِيْ كَهْفِهِمْ ثَلٰثَ مِائَةٍ سِنِيْنَ وَازْدَادُوْا تِسْعًا") ("And they tarried in the Cave three hundred years and add nine").

In this sentence, the verb "لَبِثُوْا" (labithū) ("remained") comes before the subject. This head-initial structure shows how the verb, as the head of the sentence, assigns a nominative case to the third-person plural masculine pronoun (وا) attached to it (the verb root لبث labith) indicating the subject as "they.".

4. Verse 25: "وَلَبِثُوْا فِيْ كَهْفِهِمْ ثَلٰثَ مِائَةٍ سِنِيْنَ وَازْدَادُوْا تِسْعًا") ("And they tarried in the Cave three hundred years and add nine").

From a semantic perspective, the noun سِنِيْنَ (sinīn) (years) is the head of the compound noun ثَلٰثَ مِائَةٍ سِنِيْنَ (three hundred year) , carrying the core meaning of the hypernym "years." It is in the accusative case and the whole structure is head-final.

5. Verse 24: "وَاذْكُرْرَّبَّكَ اِذَا نَسِيْتَ" ("And remember your Lord if you forget").

In this sentence, the conditional "اِذَا" (idhā) (if) comes before the condition verb نَسِيْتَ (forget) to form a conditional phrase. This head-initial structure shows how the conditional " اِذَا " (idhā) determines the conditional property of the sentence.

6. Verse 35: "وَدَخَلَ جَنَّتَهَ وَهُوَ ظَالِمٌ لِنَفْسِهٖ-قَالَ مَا اَظُنُّ اَنْ تَبِيْدَ هٰذِهٖ اَبَدًا") ("And he entered his garden having wronged himself. He said, 'I do not think that [all] this will ever perish").

In this sentence, there is a prepositional phrase "لِنَفْسِهٖ" (li-nafsihi) ("having wronged himself"), the preposition "لـ-" (li-) comes before the noun "نَفْسِهٖ" (nafsihi). This head-initial structure shows how the preposition affects the noun that follows it by assigning a genitive case to it.

7. Verse 66: "هَلْ اَتَّبِعُكَ عَلَى اَنْ تُعَلِّمَنِ مِمَّا عُلِّمْتَ رُشْدًا") ("Moses said to him, 'May I follow you for the purpose that you teach me of what you have been taught [in the way] of probity?").

This sentence contains the complementizer "هَلْ" (hal) (May) which comes at the beginning of the sentence. This head-initial structure shows how the complementizer "هَلْ" (hal) determines the interrogative property of the sentence.

8. Verse 46: "اَلْمَالُ وَالْبَنُوْنَ زِيْنَةُ الْحَيٰوةِ الدُّنْيَا") ("Wealth and children are an adornment of the life of this world").

The noun الْمَالُ (al-māl) takes the nominative case marker **because it** is the subject **(Mubtada')** of the sentence. Its predicate is "زِيْنَةُ". The whole constituent can be classified as a head-initial sentence.

9. Verse 89: "ثُمَّ اَتْبَعَ سَبَبًا") ("Then he followed a way").

The past tense verb "(أَتْبَعَ) followed" takes an optional null subject that refers to "He". The noun سَبَبًا (away) is the object and consequently accusative case is assigned to it. The structure of the sentence is head-initial.

10. Verse 98: "كَانَ وَعْدُ رَبِّیْ حَقًّا" ("for my Lord's promise is [always] true").

The verb كَانَ (kāna) (for) is one of the verbs called incomplete (الناقصة) (nāqiṣa). Its subject وَعْدُ **is مبتدأ)** (promise) where the nominative case is assigned to it while its **Predicate (خبر) is وَعْدُ** (promise) and the accusative case is assigned to it. The expression is a head-initial sentence.

1.3. Conclusion:

According to the analyses shown above, two points need to be clarified here:

1. Arabic grammar often assigns the head role to the first element in a phrase. In other words, the head-initial structures are dominant in Arabic.

2. Though syntactic analysis tends to favor initial head structures in the selected data, a closer look at their semantics reveals cases where the true "meaning-maker" (head) occupies the final position. More specifically, the head-final structure is identified within compound words.

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